

Sports Illustrated

GREATEST OF THE SEC

CELEBRATING THE BEST
Quarterbacks, Running Backs, Games,
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IN CONFERENCE HISTORY

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SPC SPECIALS

TENNESSEE
Peyton Manning

Sports Illustrated | GREATEST OF THE SEC

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HIGH TIDE

Alabama has had plenty to celebrate over the years, and the school's success has earned it several top rankings here.

Photograph by Pouya Dianat

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Bill Syken *Editor*
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Cristina Scalet *Photo Editor*
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Geoffrey A. Michaud *Premedia Director*
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Stefanie Kaufman *Project Manager*

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GREATEST OF THE SEC

Best of

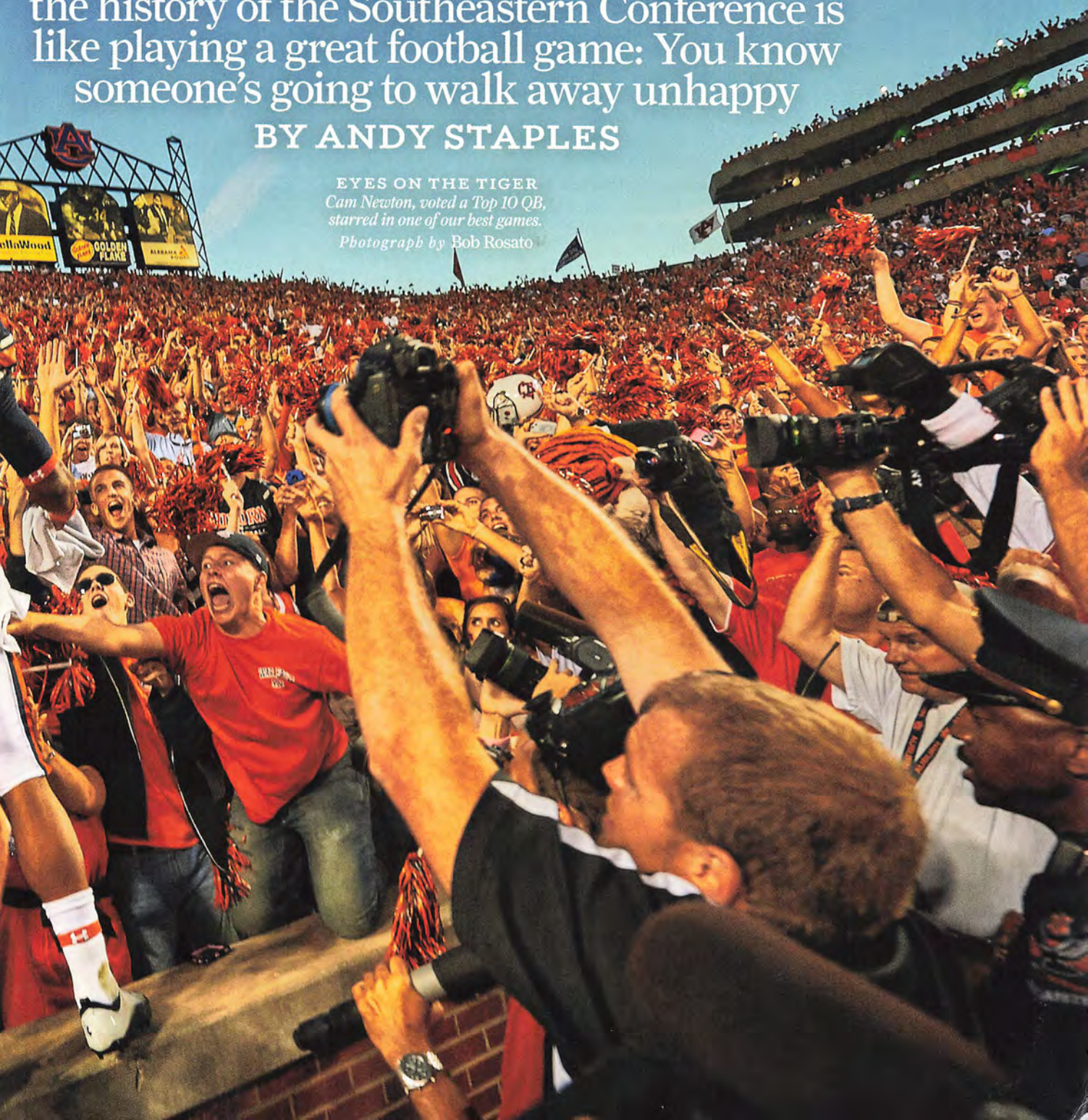


the Best

Ranking the top players and programs in the history of the Southeastern Conference is like playing a great football game: You know someone's going to walk away unhappy

BY ANDY STAPLES

EYES ON THE TIGER
Cam Newton, voted a Top 10 QB,
starred in one of our best games.
Photograph by Bob Rosato



YOU BOUGHT THIS special edition because you love an SEC football team. This is an assumption, and while our mamas told us the same thing about assumptions that yours did, let's be frank: It's a pretty safe bet. After all, this is an issue about the best who ever played and coached football in the SEC. Now let's draw another logical conclusion. You are going to disagree with some of our rankings. This disagreement might not be mild. This disagreement could be pronounced. This disagreement could be downright vehement.

We've already established that you are a fan of an SEC football team, which means we know you care more about college football than the average college football fan. The data backing the previous statement is not empirical. The evidence is strictly anecdotal, but no less convincing. If you've ever heard Tiger Stadium at night or The Swamp at full throat or the roar in Bryant-Denny when the voice of a man called Bear rumbles from beyond the grave and through those loudspeakers, you know. Football means more in the South, and SEC fans care about their teams more than any other conference's fans.

This is why we know you will love some of these rankings, and you will hate others. SEC football doesn't inspire lukewarm feelings. It inspires massive emotional swings. A win can buoy a fan for a week. A rivalry win can offer that same fan a psychological lift for an entire year. A loss, meanwhile, can bring a grown man to tears.

It stands to reason that an Auburn fan's worldview might be completely confirmed by the place the 2013 "Kick Six" Iron Bowl occupies in the pantheon of all-time great SEC games, but an Alabama fan might rather see Wrong Way Bo from 1984 because the memory of Chris Davis returning that way-too-short field goal attempt remains too raw and could lead to some ill-considered ranting on Paul Finebaum's radio show. Likewise, a Georgia fan who agrees



For this issue SI writers and editors were polled in 2015 and asked to submit Top 10 lists for 13 categories. Votes were tallied with 10 points awarded for a first-place vote, nine points for a second-place vote and so on. Voters were then asked to justify their choices, and those comments appear with each Top 10 selection. In most cases, if one panelist had a player ranked higher than his colleagues, he was asked to speak on that player's behalf.

THE PANELISTS

Lars Anderson *former SI Senior Writer*
Tim Layden *SI Senior Writer*
Austin Murphy *SI Senior Writer*
William F. Reed *former SI Senior Writer*
B.J. Schecter *SI.com Executive Editor*
Andy Staples *SI Senior Writer*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BILL FRANKS; GARY ROSSON; BOB DONNAN/USA TODAY SPORTS; BOB MOSKOWITZ; JOHN BREWER



with the late writer Lewis Grizzard that when the good Dawgs die they go to Vince Dooley's house might shudder at the thought that the hated Steve Spurrier is ranked ahead of the finest coach who ever led men wearing silver britches.

Such passion sustains and separates the SEC.

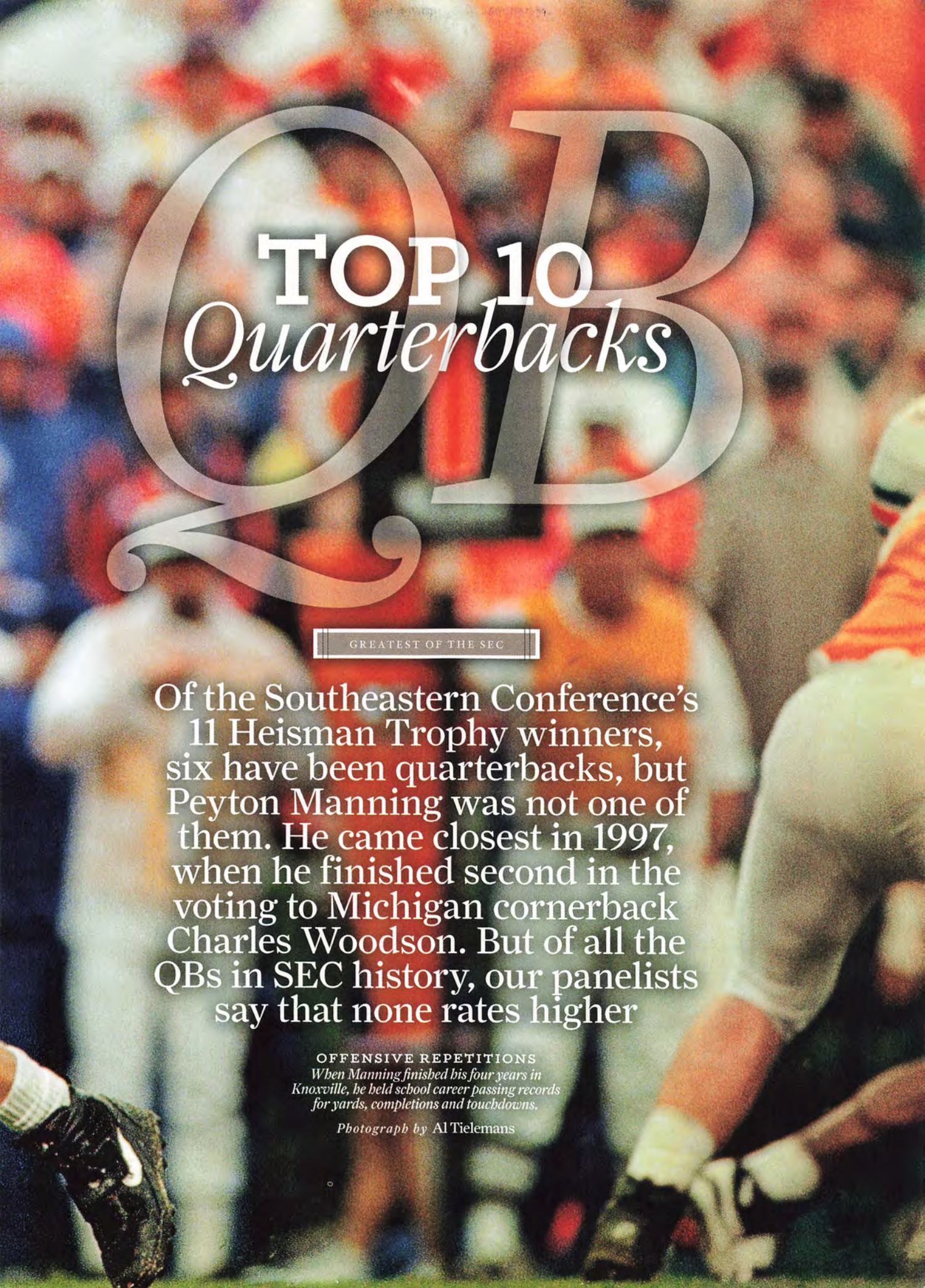
In 2014, some researchers from two non-FBS schools did a flawed study that declared the Territorial Cup game between Arizona and Arizona State to be the most intense rivalry in college football. This, of course, is utter hogwash. Several SEC rivalries are more intense. Florida and Georgia. Auburn and Georgia. Ole Miss and Mississippi State. Alabama and Tennessee. Alabama and Auburn. The researchers could have saved themselves some embarrassment by asking themselves one simple question: Did any fan of Arizona or Arizona State ever get so mad about the outcome of a game that he poisoned a sacred cactus? No? Then how could the Territorial Cup possibly be as intense as the Iron Bowl?

That intensity could cause some anger to bubble if a rival player or coach is ranked ahead of your favorite player or coach. Please understand that none of the rankings you dispute were placed in this book because of any hatred or jealousy toward your school. We love watching these games and these players, and we have done our best to get the order objectively correct. But we understand some Ole Miss fans will not want to remember the darkness that fell on the Rebels' season after Billy Cannon's punt return for LSU on Halloween of 1959. We empathize with those Auburn fans who would prefer not to be reminded of Georgia quarterback Mike Bobo, who proved Georgia play-by-play man Larry Munson wrong in '96. There was, it turns out, a way to do it with one second. And speaking of Bulldogs and heartbreak and sublime Munson oratory, Lindsay Scott's name will grace these pages. Our apologies, Florida fans.

But we promise this book will also make you happy. Those same Gators who cringe at reminders of 1980 will smile as they think of Spurrier, the quarterback and the coach. The Crimson Tide fans still sick over the Camback in 2010 will revel as they consider the relative merits of Paul Bryant versus Nick Saban because no matter who emerges victorious in that particular comparison of coaching greats, Alabama wins. We haven't forgotten about the newcomers, either. Texas A&M may have only joined in '12, but Johnny Football didn't need long to scramble his way into SEC lore.

So while some of our rankings might offend your sensibilities, we promise we'll also make you smile. Your school's best teams, best players and finest victories also will be chronicled. And though you may not endorse every single selection, we can promise that there is one thing upon which you and every other person who bought this special edition will agree: The SEC is the finest conference in college football. □





TOP 10 *Quarterbacks*

GREATEST OF THE SEC

Of the Southeastern Conference's 11 Heisman Trophy winners, six have been quarterbacks, but Peyton Manning was not one of them. He came closest in 1997, when he finished second in the voting to Michigan cornerback Charles Woodson. But of all the QBs in SEC history, our panelists say that none rates higher

OFFENSIVE REPETITIONS

When Manning finished his four years in Knoxville, he held school career passing records for yards, completions and touchdowns.

Photograph by Al Tielemans

1.

Peyton Manning

Tennessee, 1994–97

“The thousands of kids in Tennessee named Peyton are only part of his legacy. His 39 career victories set an SEC record for most wins by a starting QB, and he was the fourth player in NCAA history to throw for more than 11,000 yards.”

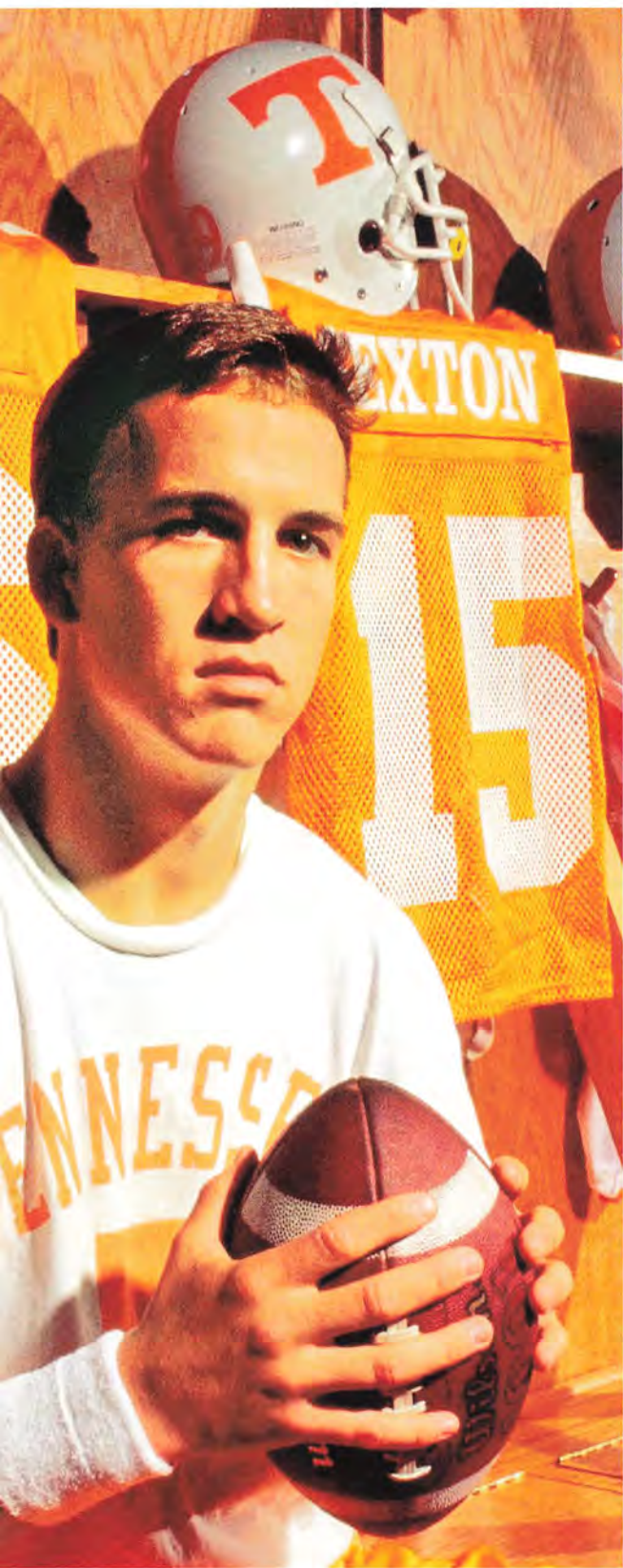
—LARS ANDERSON

VOLUNTEERED OPINIONS

Manning sought advice from the likes of Michael Jordan and Roger Staubach before deciding to spend a fourth year in Knoxville.

Photograph by
Doug Devoe/The Sporting News/Getty Images





The Vault

Excerpted from SI March 17, 1997

Peyton Manning surprised and delighted fans when he chose to forgo an expected leap to the NFL and return to Tennessee for his senior season

by TIM LAYDEN

AFTER HE ANNOUNCED his decision, this is what Peyton Manning heard most from people: "Congratulations." That and, of course, "Thank you" from love-struck Tennessee football fans, shocked that Manning would return to quarterback their Volunteers for another autumn, when it seemed so certain he would leave for the NFL. Their ardor is understandable—but *congratulations?*

By electing to play a fourth season of college football instead of accepting many millions of dollars as the probable first pick in the NFL draft, Manning was perceived by many as seizing some high moral ground and planting his personal flag in it. One Knoxville television station even sent a crew to ask schoolchildren what they had learned from Manning's virtuous choice.

Following a dinner almost 36 hours after the news conference that stopped Tennesseans in their tracks, Manning drove his Oldsmobile Bravada through West Knoxville, passing under a huge, orange billboard that read THANK YOU PEYTON. The statewide canonization struck him as sweet but misplaced. "What I did is selfish," said Manning. "I didn't do it because it's right for any other college athlete who has to make the same kind of decision. Michael Jordan, when I talked to him, told me to do what I want to do. That was the key word here: *want*. And believe me, the decision was close."

It was so close, in fact, that if an NFL coach or scout or personnel man had given Manning a clear evaluation of whether his skills were NFL-ready, Tennessee might be sizing up sophomore Tee Martin or junior Jermaine Copeland as starting quarterback right now. If Manning had only heard from somebody like Denver Broncos offensive coordinator Gary Kubiak, who told SI before Manning's announcement, "I think he's phenomenal. He makes every throw. His mechanics are second to none. He runs the no-huddle flawlessly. I told [Broncos coach] Mike Shanahan,

"If the Jets [who have the first pick in the NFL draft] get this kid, they're going to turn it around in a hurry."

But the NFL strongly discourages teams from pursuing or even commenting on an underclassman until the player has declared for the draft. The league takes great pride in shielding underclassmen—a ridiculous classification in Manning's case; he has played 36 games and will graduate in May with a 3.61 in speech communications—from the knowledge that would help them make an informed decision. Former NFL quarterback Archie Manning, Peyton's father-friend-adviser and about as connected as anyone when it comes to football, turned over a cartload of rocks looking for information and didn't find enough to satisfy Peyton. "I'll tell you," said Archie, "the league stands up on that promise about juniors."

Peyton found a staggering list of people on the fringe to consult. There was not only Jordan but also former NFL luminaries Hank Stram, Fran Tarkenton, Roger Staubach ("Peyton, it was an honor to win the Heisman," he said, "but it didn't make me a better NFL player. Please do not go back just to win that") and Phil Simms ("I watched your bowl game, and I know you're ready," Simms said, making a 180-degree turn from last fall, when he told Archie that Peyton should stay four years).

He quizzed current NFL quarterbacks Troy Aikman ("I've seen you a lot on television," he said. "I think you're ready"); Drew Bledsoe ("Peyton, pro football is the best job in the world, because you're playing football and that's all you have to concentrate on"); and Rick Mirer ("I wouldn't trade my last year at Notre Dame for anything").

Just 11 days before his announcement, Manning was in Charlottesville, Va., visiting his longtime girlfriend, Ashley Thompson, a senior at Virginia. The Wake Forest basketball team was in town to play the Cavaliers, so Manning visited with Demon Deacons senior center Tim Duncan, who has twice bypassed the NBA draft and might have been the overall No. 1 pick a year ago.

Manning: "I'm going through a tough decision. I could use a little advice."

Duncan: "What pick will you be?"

Manning: "From what I understand, first."

Duncan (eyebrows raised): "O.K., how close are you to your degree?"

Manning: "I graduate in May."

Duncan: "What are you asking me for? What's the advice?"

At the end of his quest Manning found that only Mirer supported the idea of staying at Tennessee. Manning had assumed since early fall that he was playing his last season of college football, yet as he wrapped up his research he felt a creeping uncertainty. The argument to go pro still seemed somehow unconvincing and incomplete. "Aikman said I was ready, Simms said I was ready, and I valued their

"I don't know if you tailgate in the NFL," Manning said, "but we've been doing it for three years here and I want do it for one more."

opinions," said Manning. "But I got no clear-cut evaluation from an NFL coach. In a lot of ways, I wanted that. I don't care what Mel Kiper Jr. says. Maybe the NFL people were scared because they're not supposed to give that stuff out. I don't know. But as my decision got closer, I started imagining myself at some NFL training camp, throwing from the five-step drop. I've heard in the pros that with the five-step, it's 'Five steps, make a move around a rusher, then throw and still not be late.' What if I got out there and I just hadn't done it enough times and I was late? I'd be thinking, Damn, I'm not ready. I should have stayed. Maybe I did need one more year."

Then there is a long pause. Manning knows some people suspect that he's afraid to take the challenge of the NFL, that he's like some delicate child, swaddled in the cocoon of college football, that he left more on the table than any underclassman, ever, out of fear. That's a wild misperception. Manning is a savage competitor, and if he once thought of college football as the final rung on his ladder, that's surely no longer the case. "I need to get into the NFL," said Manning. "I can't wait to get there, and I want that challenge. But I want it with every bit of ammunition I've got. When I came to Tennessee, I attacked the job. Well, I promise you, come next January 2 or 3, I'm going to attack the NFL. Drew Bledsoe told me that no matter when I came out, I was going to struggle in my rookie year. I

believe I'll struggle less by staying here this year, playing with the bullets flying. And I have every intention of being in exactly the same draft position next year."

One other silly perception: Manning hasn't given due thought to the possibility of a career-ending injury. Manning's older brother Cooper's football career was ended with the discovery of a congenital spinal condition when he was a freshman at Mississippi in 1992. "With what happened to Cooper," said Peyton, "I've counted every day of football since my junior year in high school as lucky."

His decision to stay at Tennessee evolved into an uncomplicated matter, if not a painless one. College football is what he knows, and the NFL remained a great unknown. Peyton Manning does not do unknowns. He would sooner play Florida helmetless than venture forward unprepared. "I have the opportunity to do this," he said. "I'm entitled to play four years, so I'm going to."

The bottom line was, he couldn't shake the caveat that not just Jordan but also every other celebrity he spoke to offered: You do what you want to do. Manning rolled that one around in his brain and heart. "I want to be around [senior wideout] Marcus Nash for a few more months," Manning said. "I want to walk to class and hear people say, 'Good luck in the game.' I want to see that little orange section in the stands at road games. I really do. I want to tailgate with my parents after the games and then go out to dinner. I don't know if you tailgate in the NFL, but we've been doing it for three years here, and I want to do it for one more."

Manning also vowed to tap the brakes, to bring the superstar collegian, pro-in-waiting bandwagon nearer the speed limit. He started taking classes in the summer before his freshman season and loaded up academically with such gusto that he will be finished in three years. This winter, at 20 years old (he turns 21 on March 24), Peyton found himself throwing with an NFL-issue football and honing his seven-step drop for the pros when it seemed he had just left high school. Rush job, indeed.

Two days after his announcement, he showed up for a 6 a.m. off-season running and weightlifting session. "Could have been the first guy in the draft, and he's here at six," said strength coach John Stucky.

"I was 50 pounds lighter after the decision," said Manning. Now he can be in Nash's August wedding. Now he can take a jab at Virginia Tech quarterback Jim Druckenmiller, whom Manning saw quoted as ridiculing his indecision and who is now sure to be enriched by Manning's absence from the draft. "Jim Druckenmiller owes me a cold beverage," Manning said. Now he can play in Gainesville again. And now he can truly be ready for the NFL in a year. He walked from the football complex into the cool morning air with two game tapes in his right hand. College game tapes. Tap, tap. □

2.



Danny Wuerffel

Florida, 1993-96

"Steve Spurrier finally found his muse in Wuerffel, who led the Gators to SEC titles in 1994, '95 and '96. In that final season, Wuerffel won the Heisman Trophy and led the Gators to their first national title."

—ANDY STAPLES

3.



Tim Tebow

Florida, 2006-09

"Tebow threw for 9,285 career yards and 88 touchdowns while rushing for 2,947 yards and 57 TDs. He won the Heisman in his first year as a starter, and he led the Gators to a pair of national titles."

—B.J. SCHECTER

4.



Archie Manning

Mississippi, 1968-70

"Throwing for 4,753 career yards and running for another 823, Manning so captivated fans with his innovative scrambles that he became a folk hero. Sons Peyton and Eli became star QBs at Tennessee and Ole Miss, respectively."

—WILLIAM F. REED



Cam Newton

Florida, 2007-08
Auburn, 2010

"He started for only one year, at Auburn, but what a year. Newton was the first SEC player to rush for 1,000 yards and pass for 2,000 in a season, and he led Auburn to a national title."

—LARS ANDERSON



Joe Namath

Alabama, 1962-64

"Known as much as a playboy as a passer, this Pennsylvania product led the Tide to the '64 national title. After Alabama he snubbed the NFL to sign a then-unprecedented \$400,000 contract with the AFL's New York Jets."

—WILLIAM F. REED



Pat Sullivan

Auburn, 1969-71

"A dual-threat quarterback before the term even existed, Sullivan set a then-NCAA record with 72 touchdowns (54 throwing and 18 rushing) in three seasons as starter. As a senior, Sullivan won the Heisman Trophy."

—ANDY STAPLES





8.

Steve Spurrier

Florida, 1964–66

“Before he became the Head Ball Coach at Florida and, later, at South Carolina, Spurrier was Everybody’s All-America, a cocky, apple-cheeked Heisman winner who led the Gators to two bowl appearances in three seasons.”

—TIM LAYDEN



CONFIDENCE GAME

Spurrier, who became a fan favorite by leading the Gators in fourth-quarter comebacks, once kicked a game-winning field goal.

Photograph by James Drake

GARY BOGDON (NEWTON); NEIL LEFER (NAMAHI); HEINZ KLUETMEIER (SULLIVAN)

9.

Johnny Manziel

Texas A&M, 2012–13

“As a redshirt freshman in 2012, Johnny Football became a pop-culture icon, helping the Aggies dominate in their first SEC season while winning the Heisman Trophy in the process. But he actually put up better passing numbers in ‘13.”

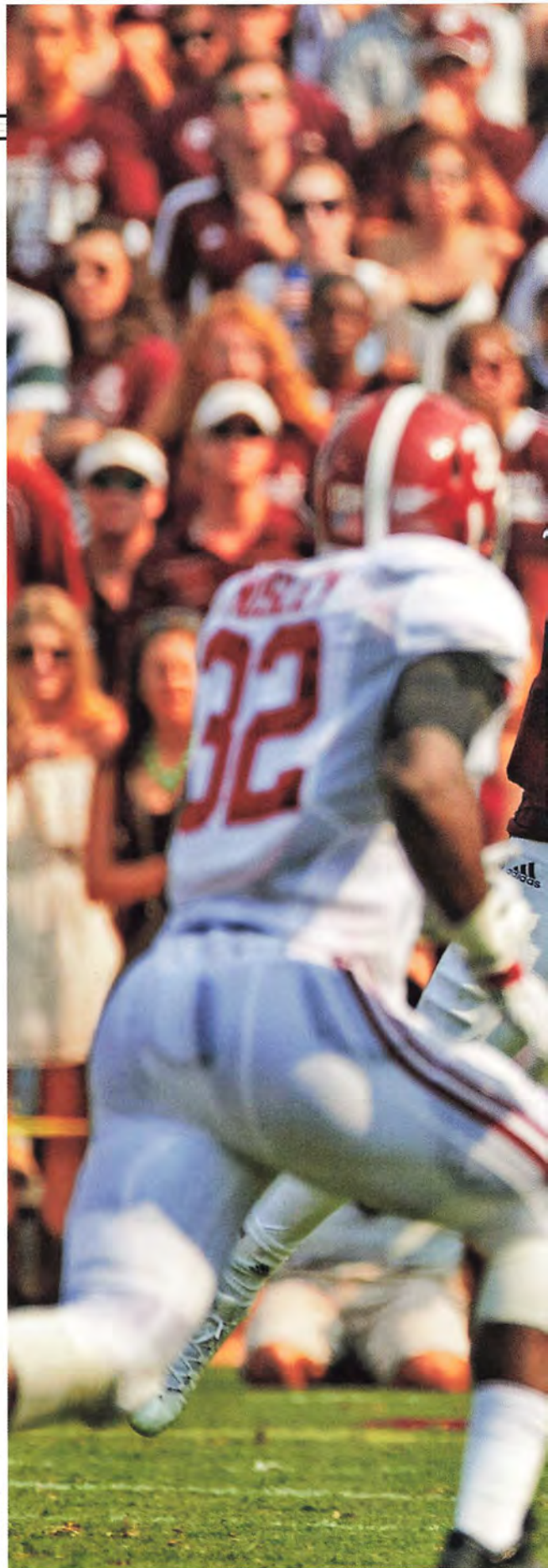
—B.J. SCHECTER



CRIMSON CLASH

A 29–24 upset win against top-ranked Alabama highlighted Manziel’s debut season, though Alabama won the rematch in 2013.

Photograph by John W. McDonough



NFL PHOTOS/AP (TITLE)



10.

Y.A. Tittle

LSU, 1944-47

"Before playing 17 seasons in the NFL, Tittle was a running back in LSU's so-so single wing. In 1945, Tigers coach Bernie Moore switched to the T formation and made Tittle his quarterback. Pyrotechnics ensued."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



A full-page photograph of a football game. In the foreground, a player in a white jersey with orange and yellow stripes on the sleeves is being tackled by several players in red jerseys. The player in white is on the ground, and the red-jerseyed players are on top of him. In the background, a large crowd of spectators is visible, many wearing red clothing. The scene is set on a green football field.

GREATEST OF THE SEC

These days it is quarterbacks like Tim Tebow and Johnny Manziel who are turned into folk heroes, but there was a time when it was running backs who captured the imagination, and no two players did so more than Herschel Walker and Bo Jackson, the top two names on every SI panelist's ballot

TOP 10 *Running Backs*

HE'S ALL THAT

Walker's rare athleticism helped him become not only a three-time All-America in football, but also a two-time All-America in track.

Photograph by Ronald C. Modra

1.

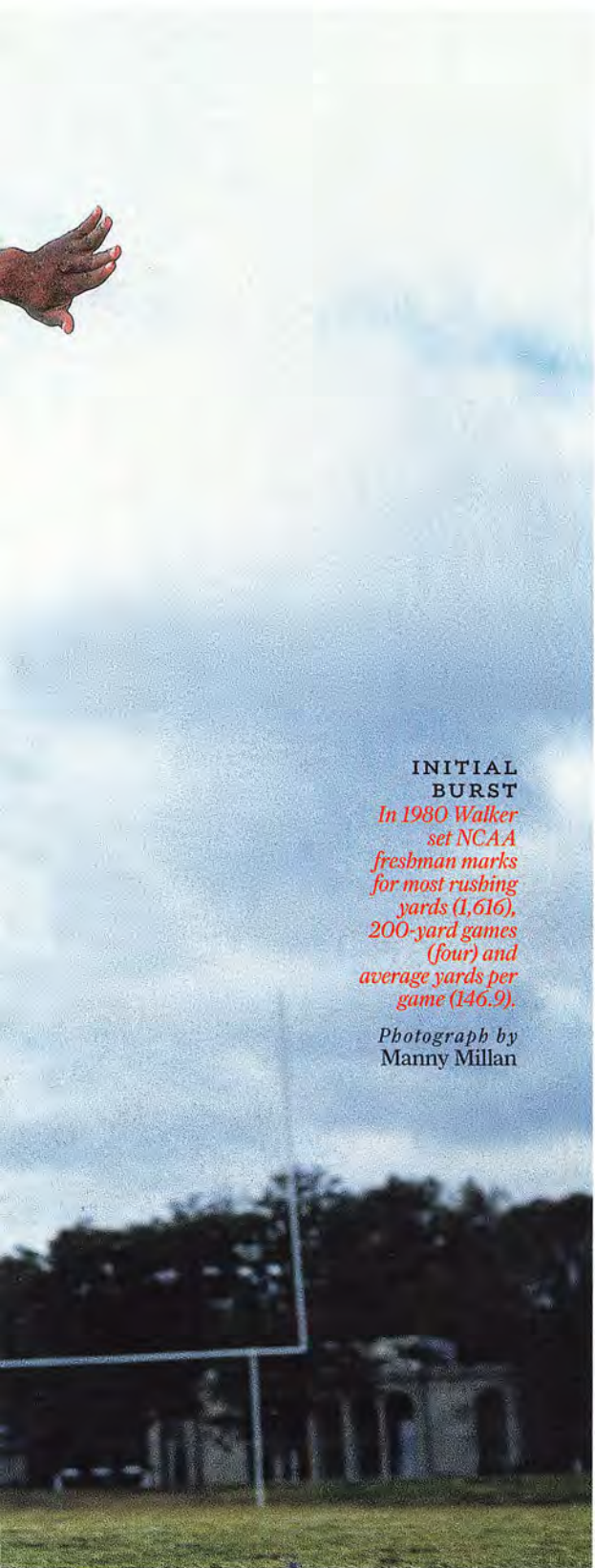
Herschel Walker

Georgia, 1980–82

“From the time Walker stepped on campus he dominated, leading the Bulldogs to a national title as a freshman and winning the Heisman in 1982. He finished his collegiate career with 5,259 yards and set 11 NCAA records.”

—B.J. SCHECTER





INITIAL BURST

*In 1980 Walker
set NCAA
freshman marks
for most rushing
yards (1,616),
200-yard games
(four) and
average yards per
game (146.9).*

*Photograph by
Manny Millan*

The Vault

Excerpted from SI, August 31, 1981

Herschel Walker took his time to declare that he would play for the Bulldogs, but once in Athens there was nothing slow about the way he fulfilled his promise

by CURRY KIRKPATRICK

TIME HAS ALWAYS been of the essence for heroes. In Wrightsville, Ga. there was time enough to run for 86 touchdowns and 6,137 yards, 45 and 3,167 of those in his senior year alone, when Johnson County won the state Class A championship. Head coach Jimmy Moore remembers the practices: "Track meets," he says. "Run a play—TD. Run a play—TD. I swear Herschel used to let people tackle him so he wouldn't have to run so far."

Where would he go to college? A Clemson man supposedly requested a clandestine meeting with Walker in a graveyard outside of town. Southern Cal coach John Robinson supposedly registered in a hotel, fully prepared to whisk him off to the Pacific Coast; that John Robinson turned out to be a salesman from Huntsville, Ala. Finally, on Easter Sunday, when Walker's decision was relayed to Mike Cavan, the Georgia assistant coach who had virtually lived for six months in a lakeside cabin while pursuing his quarry, Cavan screamed so wildly his family thought he'd been shot.

Four months later Walker fled his sheltered, teenage kingdom. "It is time to move on and give life a try," he wrote in a poem entitled *It's Almost Gone*. The night before Walker set out on the trail, he took one final drive by the old high school field. He was all alone. The next morning he left for Athens before dawn.

Is Herschel Walker the first hero ever to ride off into the sunrise? No matter. From his beginnings in the big time, this gentle, poised creature, blessed with such a magnificent body, such immense talent, couldn't seem to escape the circumstances which kept mounting to certify him as mythical. Either that or . . . *this was all planned.*

In the Georgia media guide, first-semester freshmen aren't listed on the depth chart. Under "tailback" last fall there were five other names. During preseason practice Walker moved up to third string, but his timing was off; he wasn't hitting the proper holes and he didn't break one long gainer.

There were easy outs, of course. Walker had played in Class A, consisting of the smallest schools in the state. The Georgia varsity was angered by his delay in signing and was ready, gunning to nail him.

Later, with the full spotlight of the freshman's astonishing season blazing away, an opposing theory gained momentum. It was simply that Walker, the sensitive soul, the pragmatist, the babe from the backwoods who knew the best road, was playing possum. He was never a practice player anyway, remember. "I play as well as I want to," he said once, slipping. Could it be that this phenom was so good he could deliberately set out to pace himself, to gradually fit into the team picture, to be unspectacular, to drink no wine before its time?

GEORGIA COACH Vince Dooley says it took Walker *seven* games to become a seasoned, intelligent runner, to "escape the sandlot." Did Walker actually conceal his skills, refusing to impose his stardom on his elders until it was absolutely necessary? Could he get away with all that and then just, *just happen*? "It's like fishing, I guess," the youngster would say in explanation of his gift many weeks after the fact. "You drop the hook in the water and when you see it bob you pull it out."

What happened that first time, that cloudy night of Sept. 6 in Knoxville, Tenn., and, indeed, what happened on all the rest of Georgia's fairy-tale Saturdays, furnished no more logical explanation. Walker didn't enter the Tennessee game until the second quarter. He didn't gain his 25th yard until his 11th carry. Then in a span of a little more than seven minutes in the middle of the second half—with the Dogs whimpering and seemingly long gone—Walker took command, carried the ball on eight of 12 plays, gained 53 of Georgia's 91 yards and scored two touchdowns to rally the Dogs from a 15–2 deficit to a 16–15 victory.

The first touchdown run was instantly burned into the souls of Dogs fans forever because during the few seconds it took Walker to slant right, cut back and explode 16 yards up the middle, they could see the future—and the future had WALKER MY DOG plastered on bumpers all over the state. As his family, gathered on the front porch in Wrightsville, listened to the car radio, screaming "Do it, Bo! Do it, Bo!" ("Bo" was his family nickname). Walker beat six different Tennessee defenders, most notably safety Bill Bates, who met him helmet-on and was toppled head-over-fanny backward as easily as if he were an inflatable rubber toy with sand in the base. While Bates was left to wonder if anybody caught the license number, Walker split two more Vols defenders at the goal line and went in standing up.

Dooley would later describe the play as "fantastic, electric. All of a sudden, you just knew. . . ." Center Joe Happe says, "It was stunning. The effect that single run had on

During the few seconds it took Walker to slant right, cut back and explode 16 yards up the middle, Georgia fans could see the future.



our team, I just can't explain it. All of us, we went crazy and played over our heads the rest of the game. [The rest of the season?] There was no way we would lose."

Ninety-five thousand fans, the largest crowd ever to see a football game in the South, were on their feet not knowing whether to laugh or cry at what they had just witnessed but knowing it was something very special. Walker himself slowly turned around to face the oncoming hordes. He held out both his hands, palms up, for the routine congratulatory hand-slap. At this transcendent moment, it was obvious that Herschel Walker had been there, somewhere, before. *Ring, ring, goes the bell.*

There would be other glorious Herschel Walker journeys encompassed in Georgia's perfect 12–0 season. The very next week the Dublin *Courier Herald* greeted Walker's first home game at Athens with this stentorian headline: DEBUT! HERSCHEL BETWEEN THE HEDGES! The newspaper suggested to its readers: "You might want to stash this away somewhere to show your grandchildren one day." Walker ran for 145 yards and three TDs against Texas A&M.

Every week a new wrinkle. For power aficionados there was Walker's 60-yard ramble against Vanderbilt following a play in which he was penalized for a late block. So he got mad and took off, looking for people to blast until he finally, mercifully, found pay dirt. For speed freaks, there was the 76-yard scamper against South Carolina in which

three Gamecocks defenders had the easy angle to spear Walker over the sideline and into Athens' famous greenery. The trio came up empty. For record-keepers, there was the 65-yarder late in the game with Georgia Tech that broke Tony Dorsett's total yardage mark for freshmen.

The sine qua non for all running backs is their ability at that moment when the hole closes. Do they whirl, shift direction, lower the helmet? Spin off? Slow up? Power move? What Walker seems to do better than anyone before him is to accelerate right then and there and whip into a gear unbeknownst to mere football players. Remember, we are talking about an Olympic gold medal aspirant who has run the 60-yard dash in 6.24 and a wind-aided 10.22 100 meters. We're talking quick. "Herschel won't impress you with his slick moves or feints," says Cavan. "But don't let him get even with you on the field or the points start clicking on the scoreboard."

Spec Townes, the former Georgia track coach who won the gold medal in the 110-meter hurdles in the 1936 Olympics, likens Walker's gliding motion in the open field to that of an old teammate, Jesse Owens.

Walker closed out the 1980 regular season by rushing for more than 200 yards in three of his last four games. Some of his other numbers were equally staggering. Thirty-five of his 274 carries were for 10 yards or more. Seven of his 15 touchdown runs were for 48 yards or longer. His many records were achieved despite injuries that caused him to miss more than 10 full quarters. He was the first freshman to make the consensus All-America team in this century.

What may be more significant about Walker's extraordinary first year was the effect he had on 99 others, namely the members of the Georgia team whom he turned from a 6-5 crew of stumblebums into national champions partly by showing them how to hang on to his considerable bootstraps. With Walker on their side the Dogs knew they always had a chance against anybody.

At New Orleans, going for the brass ring against the mighty Fighting Irish, the Georgia offense came up empty; quarterback Buck Belue missed on his first 12 passes, and the Dogs' team yardage—excepting the tailback—amounted to minus 23 yards. On his second carry Walker's left shoulder "subluxated" after a hit from Notre Dame's Bob Crable, and he had to leave the game. Georgia trainer Warren Morris said it was the kind of injury that normally knocks a player out for three weeks. On Georgia's next possession Walker went back in. A major part of the Dogs' game plan was to throw screen passes to Walker to counter the Irish rush. No runner had gained 100 yards on Notre Dame all season. But now Walker was ordered not to try to catch a pass, not to stiff-arm and to hold the ball only with his right hand.

Subsequently, half crippled, Walker ran for 150 yards, scored two touchdowns and led Georgia to a 17-10 victory and a national championship. □



2.

Bo Jackson

Auburn, 1982-85

"There was no scarier sight for SEC defensive backs in the mid-1980s than Jackson hurtling in their direction, his legs pumping like pistons. Jackson averaged a staggering 6.6 yards a carry, still a conference record."

—LARS ANDERSON

3.

Emmitt Smith

Florida, 1987-89

"In his first college start, Smith ran through Alabama's defense for 224 yards and two TDs. Smith never stopped breaking tackles, amassing 3,928 yards in three seasons before moving on to a Hall of Fame career in the NFL."

—ANDY STAPLES

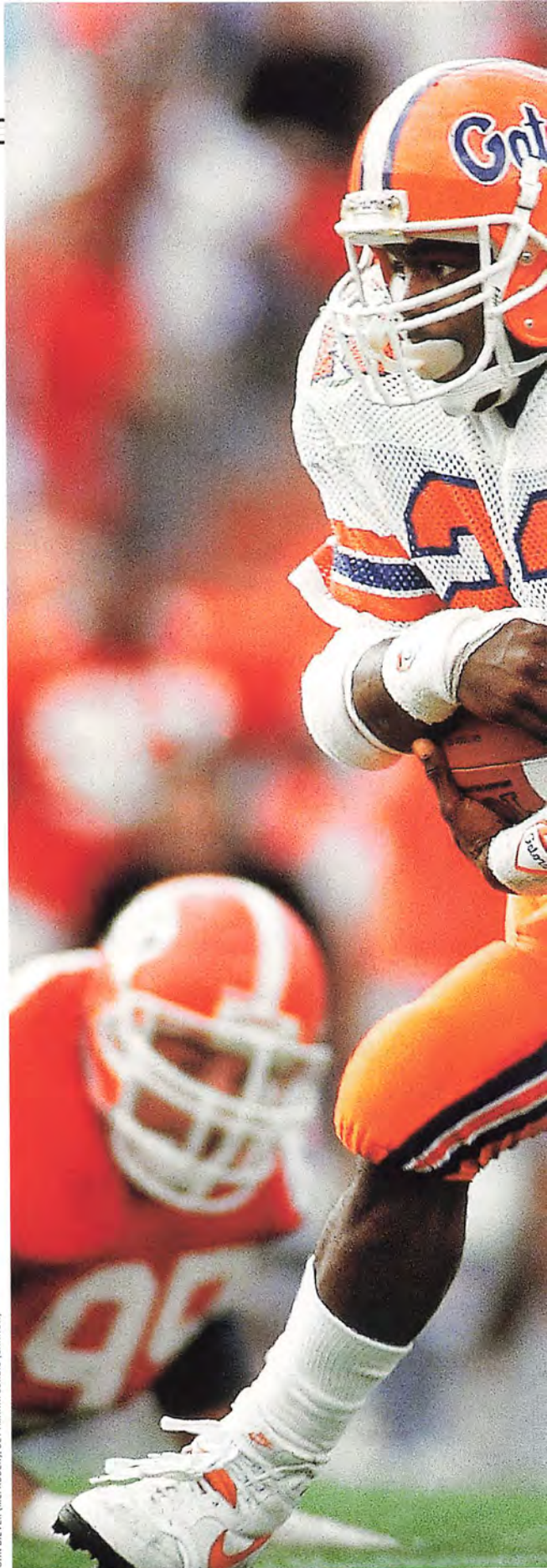


GREATER GATOR

Smith led the SEC in rushing yards twice (he missed two games with injury his other season) and was the 1989 conference player of the year.

Photograph by Bill Frakes

JOHN BIEVER (MCFADDEN); BETTMANN/CORBIS (CANNON)





4.



Darren McFadden

Arkansas, 2005-07

From North Little Rock, he chose to stay at home and become a Razorback. McFadden rushed for 4,590 career yards, the most ever by an Arkansas player and the second-most in SEC history behind Herschel Walker.

—TIM LAYDEN



5.

Billy Cannon

LSU, 1957-59

"His 89-yard TD punt return against Ole Miss on Halloween night, 1959, is arguably the most iconic play in LSU history. His versatility—he played both ways and on special teams—enabled him to win the Heisman Trophy."

—WILLIAM F. REED

6.

Mark Ingram

Alabama, 2008–10

“A bruising ballcarrier, Ingram could run through or around defenders. He won the Heisman Trophy as a sophomore in 2009 and led the Crimson Tide to a national championship that season, with 116 yards and two TDs in the title game.”

—B.J. SCHECTER



7.



Frank Sinkwich

Georgia, 1940–42

“Despite a broken jaw, ‘Flat-Footed Frankie’ passed and ran for 382 yards in the 1942 Orange Bowl. As a senior he set an NCAA record for total offense, led the Bulldogs to a national title and won the Heisman.”

—AUSTIN MURPHY

8.



Kevin Faulk

LSU, 1995–98

“In his first start as a true freshman, Kevin Faulk tore through the Mississippi State defense for 171 yards. By the time he left LSU, Faulk had amassed 4,557 rushing yards, now the third most in SEC history.”

—LARS ANDERSON



9.



Johnny Musso

Alabama, 1969-71

"The original Italian Stallion led the SEC in rushing in 1970 and '71, and he saved his best effort for the '71 Iron Bowl. Playing on a severely injured foot, Musso ran for 167 yards and two TDs in a 31-7 win over undefeated Auburn."

-ANDY STAPLES

10.

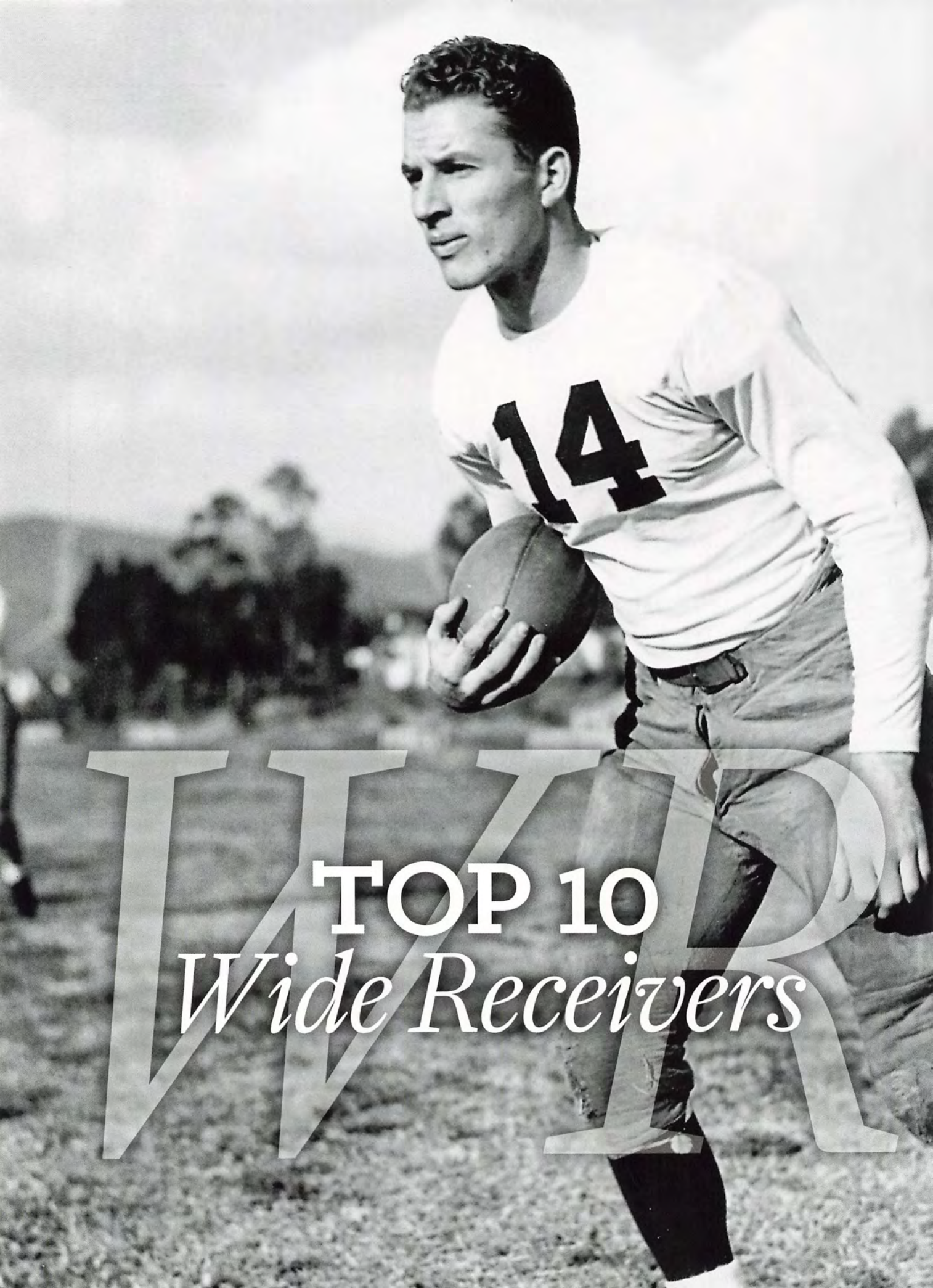


Charles Alexander

LSU, 1975-78

"A workhorse tailback, Alexander the Great still holds LSU records for the most yards gained in a season (1,686, in 1977, his junior year), most carries in a game (43) and the highest per-game average in a season (153.3)."

-TIM LAYDEN



WIDE

TOP 10
Wide Receivers

This Top 10 includes one player taken near the top of the 2015 draft and two current All-Pros, but our panel reached way, way back for its top receiver. This is a tribute to Don Hutson, who didn't just make catches but also helped redefine the way football was played

1.

Don Hutson

Alabama, 1932–34

“A pass-catching wizard even by today’s standards, Hutson was an All-America for a 1934 Tide team that went 10–0 and upset Stanford in the Rose Bowl. He went on to set 18 NFL receiving records with the Green Bay Packers.”

—WILLIAM F. REED

SURPRISE CATCH

Hutson came to Alabama on a partial baseball scholarship, but he walked on to the Crimson Tide football team and made history.

Photograph by AP

2.

A.J. Green

Georgia, 2008–10

"Though shortened by injuries and a suspension, Green's three-year career was spectacular. His height, athleticism and vast catch radius made him all but uncoverable—even in a conference stocked with future NFL corners."

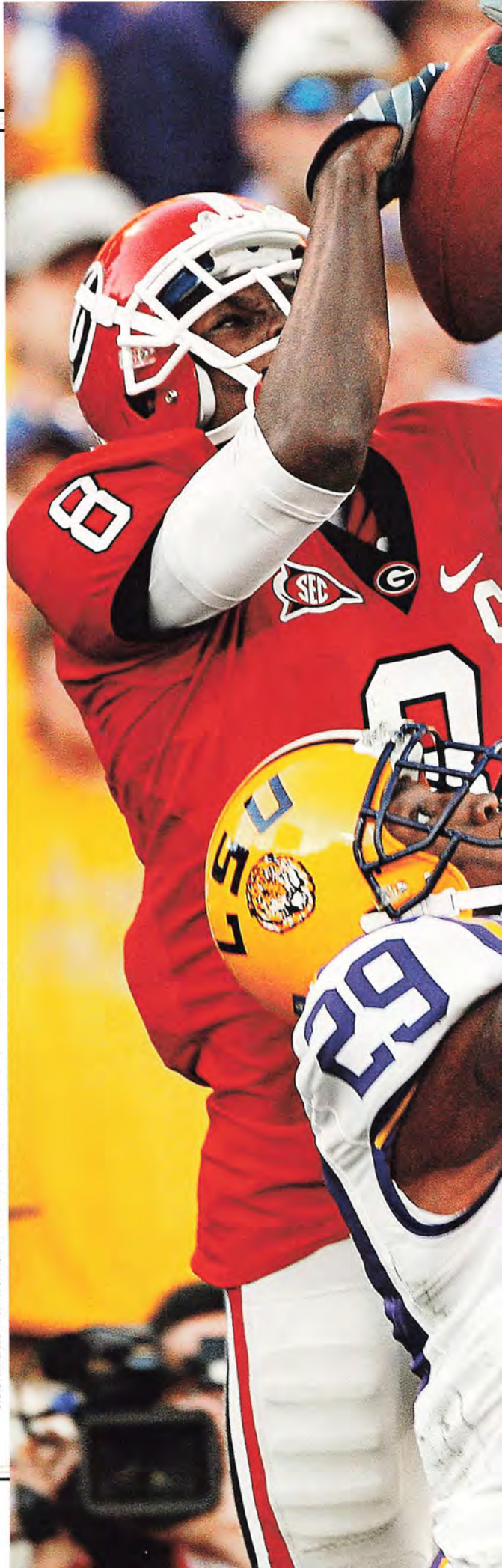
—AUSTIN MURPHY

UNFAIR FIGHT

Long-armed and 6' 4", Green enjoyed a great advantage against most defensive backs when it came to bringing down jump balls.

Photograph by John Bazemore/AP

STEVE FRANZ/LSU ATHLETICS (REED); ERIC SCHWEIKARDT (CHANDLER); KEVIN C. COV/GETTY IMAGES (COOPER)





3.



Josh Reed

LSU, 1999–2001

“Reed left LSU as the SEC’s all-time leading receiver with 3,001 yards. Though his record was broken a year later, Reed is remembered for helping Nick Saban usher in the most successful era in the program’s history.”

—ANDY STAPLES

4.



Wes Chandler

Florida, 1974–77

“Under head coach Doug Dickey the Gators were a running team, yet Chandler caught 92 passes for just shy of 2,000 yards and 22 touchdowns before going on to a stellar 11-year career in professional football.”

—TIM LAYDEN

5.



Amari Cooper

Alabama, 2012–14

“As smooth a route runner as any receiver in the Nick Saban era at Alabama, Cooper had it all: hands, speed and smarts. In 2014 he led the nation in receptions (124); and in 40 career games he scored 31 touchdowns.”

—LARS ANDERSON



7.



Earl Bennett

Vanderbilt, 2005–07

"He played at a dauntingly high level, never hauling in fewer than 75 receptions in a season. He was the SEC's all-time leader with 236 career catches until fellow Commodore Jordan Matthews broke his record."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

8.



Julio Jones

Alabama, 2008–10

"Big, fast and sure-handed, Jones caught nearly everything thrown his way and helped Alabama win a national title in '09. Double-teamed even as a freshman, Jones still averaged nearly 15 yards per catch."

—B.J. SCHECTER



6.

Carlos Alvarez

Florida, 1969–71

“He was brought to the United States from Cuba at age 10, by parents escaping the Castro regime. In 1969, Alvarez caught 88 passes—still a school record—for 12 touchdowns. His 2,563 career receiving yards are also a Florida record.”

—TIM LAYDEN

9.



Carl Pickens

Tennessee, 1989–91

“As a freshman safety, Pickens was named co-MVP of the 1990 Cotton Bowl, a 31–27 Tennessee win over Arkansas. Switched to wide receiver, he caught 109 passes for 1,794 yards and 11 TDs in his next two seasons.”

—WILLIAM F. REED

10.



Terry Beasley

Auburn, 1969–71

“Pat Sullivan’s favorite target, Beasley averaged an astounding 20.2 yards a catch as a junior in 1970. He left Auburn as the SEC’s all-time leader in receiving yards, and his mark stood until ’84.”

—ANDY STAPLES

TOP 10 *Tight*



Ends

Ozzie Newsome helped redefine the tight end position, playing both in tight or split wide. The problem for this vote was that some viewed him as a receiver, not a tight end. Thus did the Hall of Famer slip behind one player for whom position was not a question

1.

Jason Witten

Tennessee, 2000–02

“A high school defensive beast who was named Tennessee state player of the year by USA Today, Witten first played defensive end for the Vols before switching to offense. As a junior he had 39 receptions for five TDs, both school records for tight ends.”

—TIM LAYDEN

STUNNING DEVELOPMENT

Witten was thrown into the position at Tennessee but blossomed into a third-round NFL pick for Dallas who has played in 10 Pro Bowls.

Photograph by Collegiate Images/Getty Images

2.

Ozzie Newsome

Alabama, 1974–77

“He was the first true home run threat at the position in the SEC. Bear Bryant hailed Newsome, whose 20.3 career yards per catch stood as a conference record for more than two decades, as ‘the greatest end in Alabama history.’ ”

—LARS ANDERSON



3.



D.J. Williams

Arkansas, 2007–10

“Though at 6’ 2” he was considered short for the position, Williams made up for his lack of size with grit and heart. An excellent blocker and route-runner, in 2010 he won the Mackey Award, given to the nation’s top tight end.”

—B.J. SCHECTER

4.



Aaron Hernandez

Florida, 2007–09

“Before he was the target of the Massachusetts state police, the speedy, sure-handed, Mackey-award winner was a favorite target for Tim Tebow. In Florida’s BCS title game win over Oklahoma, Hernandez led all Gators receivers.”

—AUSTIN MURPHY

5.



James Whalen

Kentucky, 1997-99

"As a senior Whalen set two NCAA records for tight ends: most receptions in a season (90) and most receptions per game (8.2). On the way to 1,019 receiving yards for the year, he had five 100-yard games."

—WILLIAM F. REED

8.



Ben Troupe

Florida, 2000-03

"Troupe in '03 led the Gators in TD receptions and was the only tight end in the country that season to finish with at least 500 receiving yards and five touchdowns while averaging 15 yards per catch."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

6.



Wesley Walls

Mississippi, 1985-88

"Walls, previously a defensive end, only settled in at tight end his senior year. But he caught 36 passes and three TDs and established himself as one of the first great tight ends of the passing-game era."

—TIM LAYDEN

9.



David LaFleur

LSU, 1993-96

"With tremendous size (6' 7", 278 pounds) in addition to great speed and hands, LaFleur was especially dominant as a senior, leading the Tigers with 30 receptions for 439 yards and three touchdowns."

—B.J. SCHECTER

7.



Rufus French

Mississippi, 1996-98

"French claimed first-team All-America honors as a junior in 1998, and the 6' 3", 250-pounder's ability to block or get open down the field was a preview for what would become the norm at the position."

—ANDY STAPLES

10.



Leonard Pope

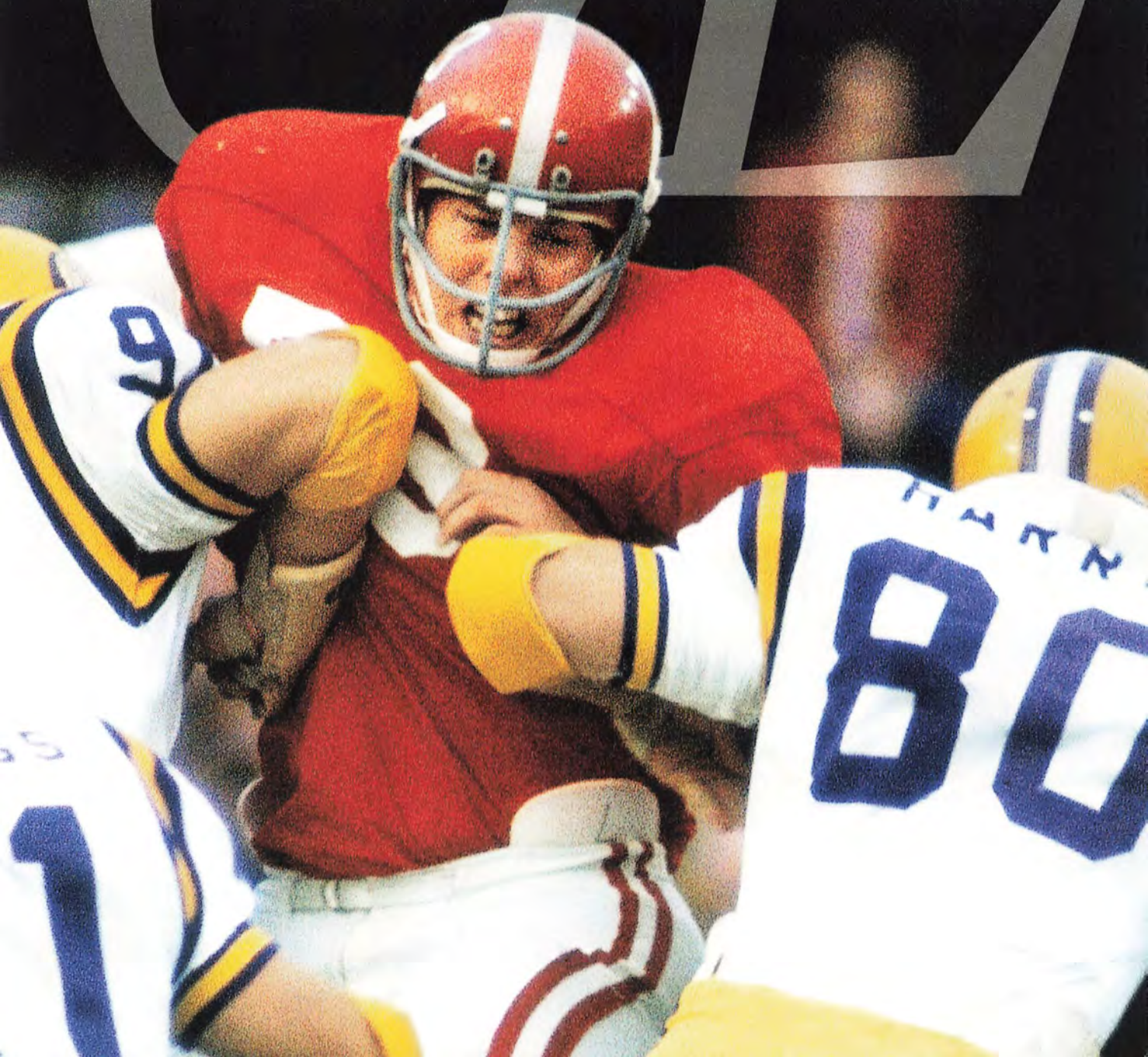
Georgia, 2003-05

"At 6' 8", Pope is the tallest tight end in SEC history. In 36 games, he made 65 catches for 1,044 yards, an average of 16.1 yards per catch. In 2004 he caught touchdown passes in five consecutive games."

—WILLIAM F. REED

TOP 10

Offensive Linemen



Comparing the blockers of yore to today's behemoths is a tough task. The modern linemen dwarf their earlier counterparts by as much as 100 pounds, but many of those slim old-timers had to handle double the workload, often playing both offense and defense. In all cases, theirs was a big job

1. John Hannah

Alabama, 1970–72

"Bear Bryant once called his guard 'the finest offensive lineman I have been around.' Hannah, who also wrestled and competed in track for the Crimson Tide, has been inducted into both the College and Pro Football Halls of Fame."

—WILLIAM F. REED

2.



**Chris
Samuels**

Alabama, 1996–99

"A rock on the Crimson Tide offensive line, Samuels started 42 consecutive games and didn't allow a sack or quarterback hurry in his senior season. He won the Outland Trophy in 1999 as Alabama won the SEC title."

—B.J. SCHECTER

3.



**Matt
Stinchcomb**

Georgia, 1995–98

"At 6' 6", 290 pounds, Stinchcomb was a force on Bulldogs teams that went 19–5 in his final two seasons in Athens under head coach Jim Donnan. Stinchcomb was a consensus first-team All-America as a senior."

—TIM LAYDEN

4.



Barrett Jones

Alabama, 2009–12

"The most versatile lineman in Crimson Tide history. Jones won the Outland Trophy as a junior left tackle and the Rimington Award as a senior center. He was the heart and soul of three national championship teams."

—LARS ANDERSON

6.



Jake Matthews

Texas A&M, 2010–13

"Trench warfare was in Matthews's bloodlines: His father, Bruce, was a Hall of Fame lineman for the Oilers and Titans. Jake was an All-SEC player at both right and left tackle. He allowed only 21 pressures on 473 pass plays as a senior."

—LARS ANDERSON

5.

Lomas Brown

Florida, 1981–84

"A swift, strong, dominating, complete talent, Brown was the best player on the best offensive line in school history, the 1984 'Great Wall of Florida.' Possibly the best Gator whose name is absent from the school's Ring of Honor."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



7.



Frank (Bruiser) Kinard

Mississippi, 1935-37

"Described as the best player of his era, 'Bruiser' was as durable as he was talented, playing 708 of 720 possible minutes in 1936. He was Mississippi's first All-America, and the first Rebel in the Pro Football Hall of Fame."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

8.



Steve DeLong

Tennessee, 1962-64

"One of the lone bright spots on some terrible Tennessee teams, DeLong was a standout on both sides of the ball. He won the Outland Trophy in 1964, and SEC coaches named him the top defensive lineman three years in a row."

—B.J. SCHECTER

9.



Bob Gain

Kentucky, 1947-50

"The 1950 Outland Trophy winner did it all for the Wildcats. He kept defenders away from quarterback Babe Parilli. He chased quarterbacks as a defensive tackle. He even served as Kentucky's kicker."

—ANDY STAPLES

10.



Maurkice Pouncey

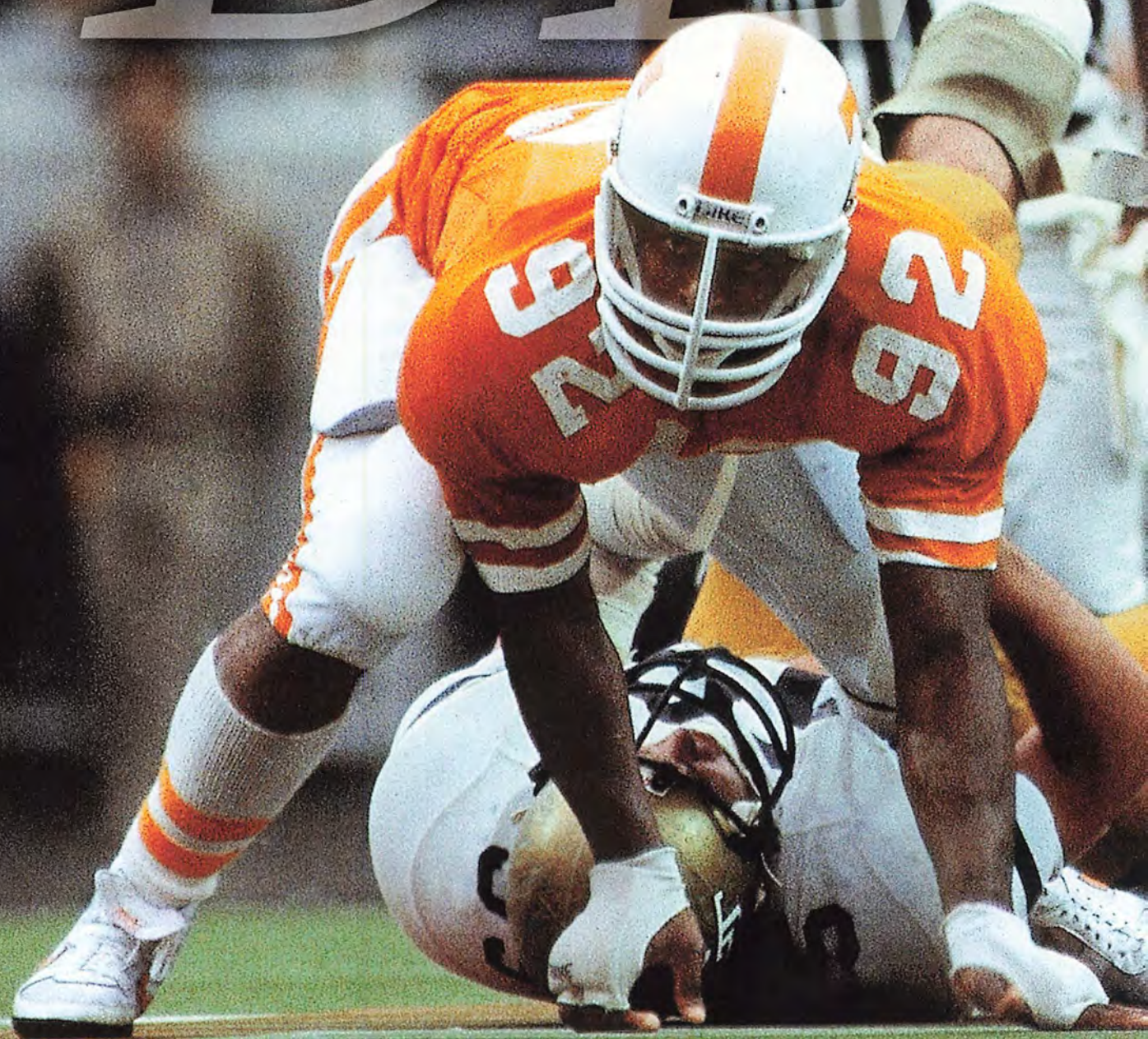
Florida, 2007-09

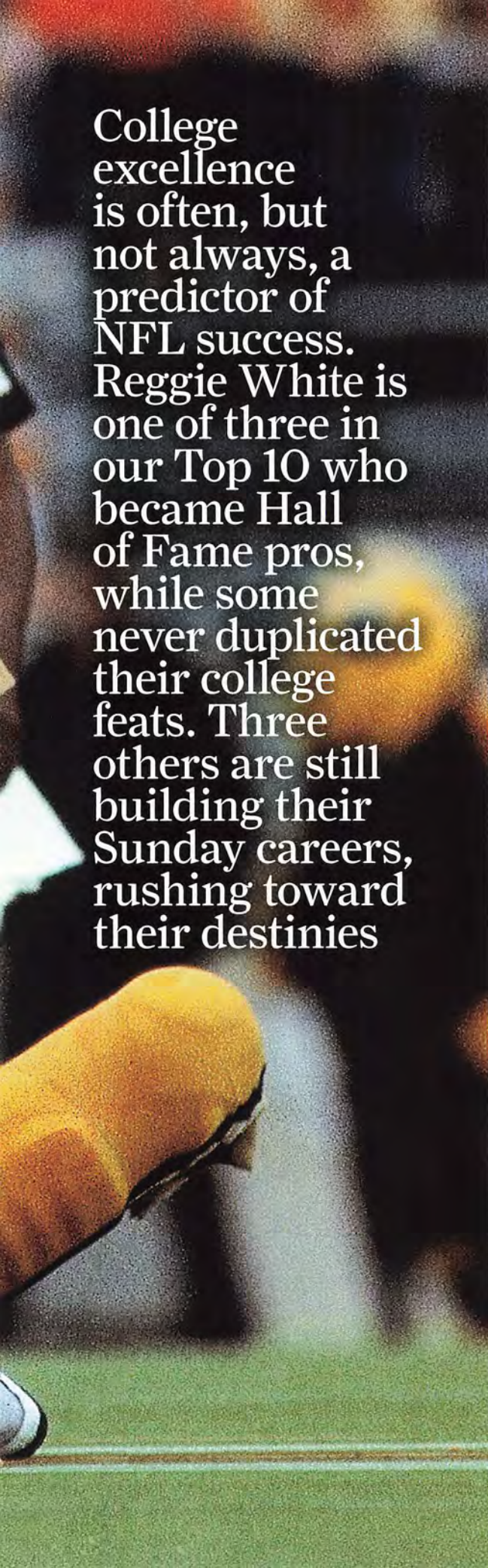
"A 6' 5", 310-pound interior lineman with quickness and power, Pouncey was the perfect fit in Florida coach Urban Meyer's spread offensive machine. As a junior he won the Rimington Award as the nation's top center."

—TIM LAYDEN



TOP 10 *Defensive Linemen*





College excellence is often, but not always, a predictor of NFL success. Reggie White is one of three in our Top 10 who became Hall of Fame pros, while some never duplicated their college feats. Three others are still building their Sunday careers, rushing toward their destinies

1.

Reggie White

Tennessee, 1980–83

“He haunted the sleep of every offensive coordinator in the SEC. White had 15 sacks his senior year—a school record—and 100 tackles, an unheard-of total for a defensive lineman. He finished his career with 32 sacks.”

—LARS ANDERSON

POINT OF ATTACK

After being slowed by ankle injury as a junior, White roared through the SEC his senior season and was named conference player of the year.

Photograph by Bill Luster

2.



Jack Youngblood

Florida, 1968-70

"Regarded as perhaps the best defensive end in Florida history, Youngblood was the SEC lineman of the year in 1970. Known for his relentless pass rushing, he had 29 quarterback sacks for his three-year varsity career."

—WILLIAM F. REED

5.



David Pollack

Georgia, 2001-04

"Pollack and Herschel Walker are the only Bulldogs to earn first-team All-America honors in three seasons. As a senior Pollack won the Lombardi Award, the Bednarik Award and the Lott Trophy."

—ANDY STAPLES

3.



Glenn Dorsey

LSU, 2004-07

"Dorsey's ability to toss opposing offensive linemen around and occupy multiple blockers made his entire defense better. In 2007, he won the Outland, Lombardi, Nagurski and Lott awards as the Tigers won a national title."

—ANDY STAPLES

4.



Tracy Rucker

Auburn, 1985-88

"Unfazed by the double teams he saw every Saturday, Rucker racked up an astounding 354 tackles in his career—48 behind the line of scrimmage, including 21 sacks—the most ever by a Tigers down lineman."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



6.



Doug Atkins

Tennessee, 1950-52

"During Atkins's three varsity years, the Vols went 29-4-1 and won the 1951 national title. The 6' 8" Atkins, a notoriously ferocious pass rusher, was named SEC player of the quarter century from '50 to '74."

—WILLIAM F. REED

8.



Jadeveon Clowney

South Carolina, 2011-13

"With the size of a tackle and the speed of a running back, Clowney wreaked havoc with 24 sacks and 47 career tackles for loss, including his bone-crushing hit on Michigan's Vincent Smith in the 2013 Outback Bowl."

—B.J. SCHECTER

7.

Nick Fairley

Auburn, 2009-10

"In the BCS title game win in January 2011 against Oregon, Fairley had three tackles for loss, a sack and a forced fumble, and was the most dominating player on the field. He holds Auburn's single-season record for tackles for loss (24.0)."

—LARS ANDERSON

9.



Art Still

Kentucky, 1974-77

"He was the best player on Kentucky's 1976 SEC co-championship team and the '77 edition that went 10-1 and was ranked No. 6 in the country. Still, who stood a towering 6' 7", was a devastating pass rusher off the edge."

—TIM LAYDEN

10.

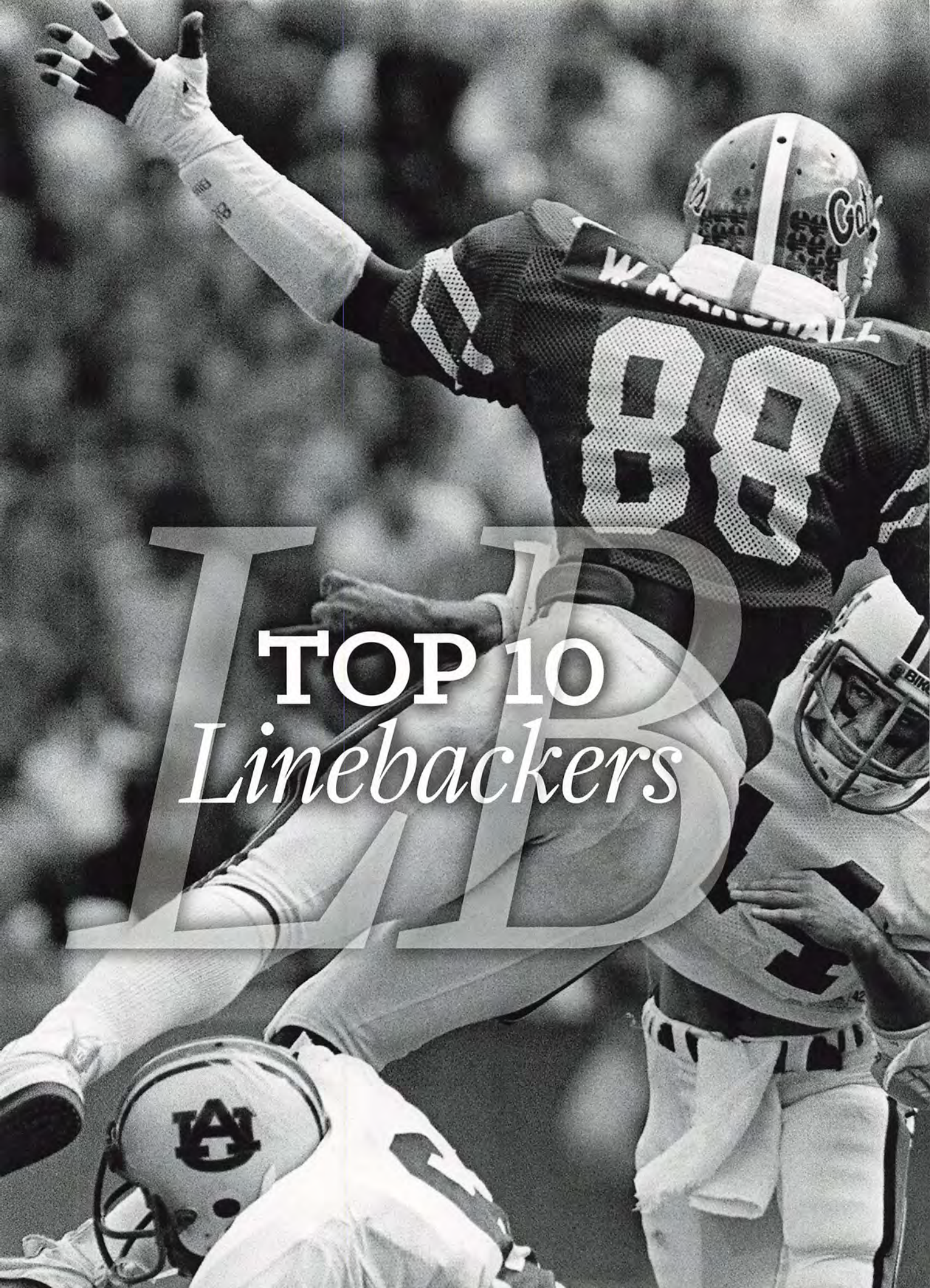


John Henderson

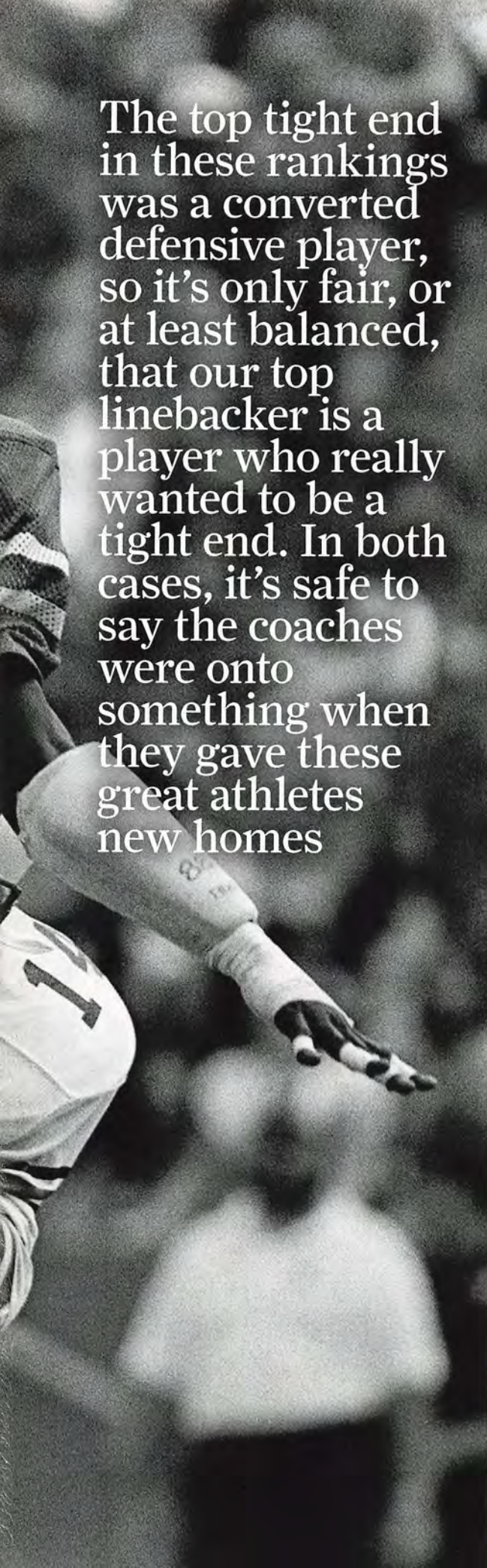
Tennessee, 1999-2001

"The mammoth 6' 7", 290-pound tackle was a wrecking ball on the Vols' defensive line. The two-time All-America had his best season as a junior in 2000, recording 21 total tackles for loss and winning the Outland Trophy."

—B.J. SCHECTER



TOP 10 *Linebackers*



The top tight end in these rankings was a converted defensive player, so it's only fair, or at least balanced, that our top linebacker is a player who really wanted to be a tight end. In both cases, it's safe to say the coaches were onto something when they gave these great athletes new homes

GREATEST OF THE SEC

1.

Wilber Marshall

Florida, 1980–83

"A high school tight end, Marshall nearly transferred when he was asked to switch to linebacker. With top-end closing speed and uncanny intuition, he was dubbed Florida's defensive player of the century by The Gainesville Sun in 1999."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

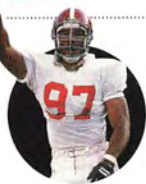


THERE IN A SECOND

Marshall, a frequent visitor to the opponent's backfield, set Florida career records for sacks (23) and tackles for loss (58).

Photograph by UAA Communications

2.



Cornelius Bennett

Alabama, 1983–86

"A three-time All-America, Bennett was the SEC's player of the year and the Lombardi Trophy winner as a senior. His hit on Notre Dame QB Steve Beuerlein was immortalized in a painting entitled 'The Sack.'"

—WILLIAM F. REED

3.



Derrick Thomas

Alabama, 1985–88

"One of the most dominant linebackers ever, Thomas had 27 sacks in 1988 and finished with an SEC record 52 in his career. A ball-seeking missile, Thomas also had five blocked kicks and 10 forced fumbles in his career."

—B.J. SCHECTER

4.

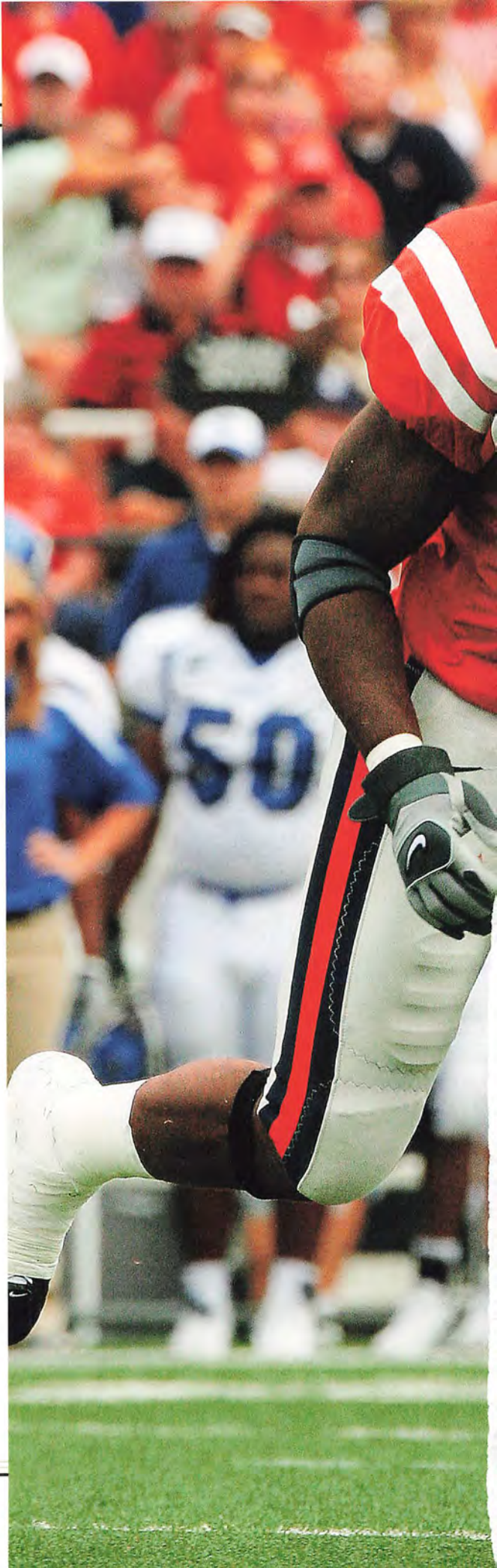


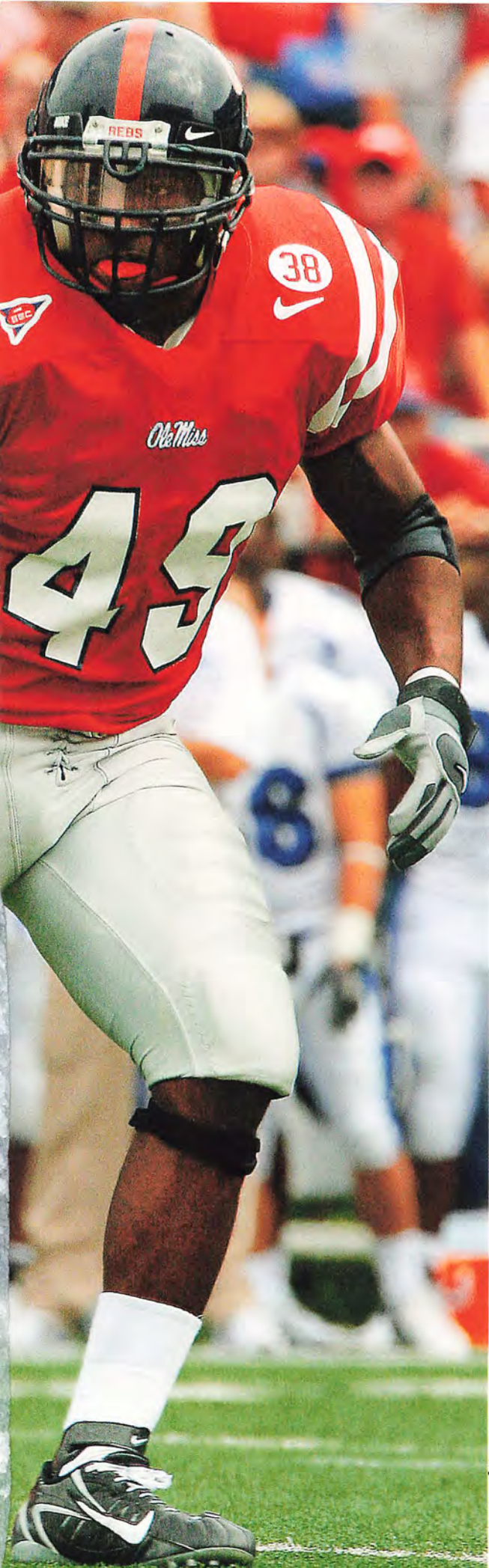
Lee Roy Jordan

Alabama, 1960–62

"It's not a misprint: Jordan made an astounding 31 tackles in Alabama's 17–0 win over Oklahoma in the 1963 Orange Bowl, Jordan's final college game. Said Bear Bryant of Jordan, 'He never had a bad day.'"

—LARS ANDERSON





DAVID L. JOHNSON (BENNETT); DAMIAN STROHMEYER (THOMAS); BETTMANN/CORBIS (JORDAN)

5.

Patrick Willis

Mississippi, 2003–06

“With a rare combination of size and speed, Willis became the most decorated defender in Ole Miss history. He led the SEC in tackles as both a junior and as a senior, and in 2006 he won the Butkus Award and the Lambert Trophy.”

—ANDY STAPLES



GOLDEN FEELING

Willis became the highest-drafted Ole Miss defensive player since 1966 when he was taken 11th by the San Francisco 49ers in 2007.

Photograph by Matthew Sharpe/Getty Images

6.

Steve Kiner

Tennessee, 1967–69

“A consensus All-America in 1968 and ’69, Kiner had a linebacker’s dream game in a 41–14 win over Alabama in ’69: Five sacks, four quarterback hurries, 11 tackles with five assists, an interception and a forced fumble.”

—WILLIAM F. REED

7.

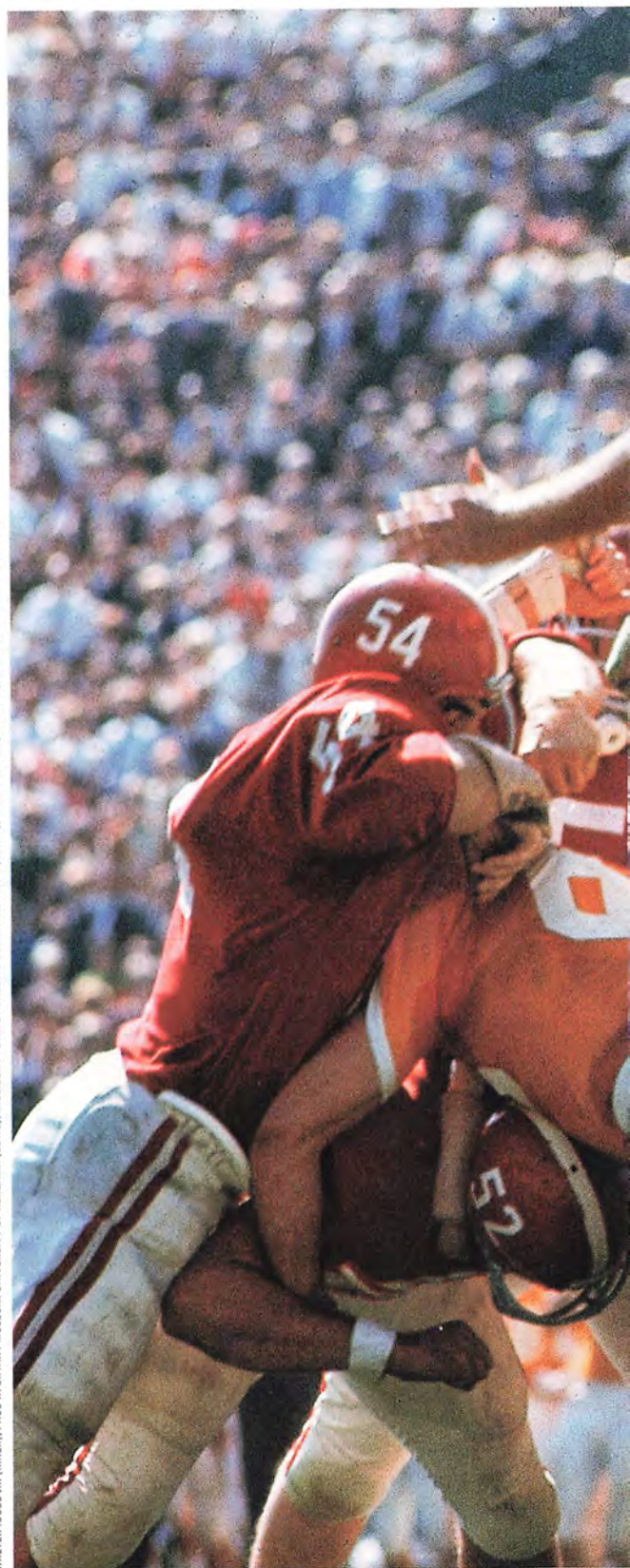


Woodrow Lowe

Alabama, 1972–75

“He played on four SEC championship teams and was named All-America in each of his last three seasons in Tuscaloosa. His 134 tackles as a sophomore in 1973 still stand as the single-season record for an Alabama defender.”

—TIM LAYDEN



WALTER IDOSS JR. (KINER); PAUL W. BRYANT MUSEUM/UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA (LOWE); MISSISSIPPI STATE ATHLETIC MEDIA RELATIONS (LEWIS); GARY BOGDON (EMANUEL); ATHLON SPORTS/AP (WILSON)



8.



D.D. Lewis

Mississippi State, 1965-67

"Lewis made up for his lack of stature with Mach 1 closing speed. Despite winning just seven games in his three varsity seasons, the two-time all-SEC performer and future Dallas Cowboy was often the best player on the field."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

9.



Frank Emanuel

Tennessee, 1963-65

"Emanuel was the ringleader of a 1965 defense that surrendered only 98 points all season. But his defining moment came a season earlier when he positively obliterated Alabama's Joe Namath during a goal line stand."

—LARS ANDERSON

10.



Al Wilson

Tennessee, 1995-98

"A natural leader, Wilson was the heart of an undefeated national championship team in 1998. His signature game that season was an overtime victory over No. 2 Florida, in which he had 12 tackles and forced three fumbles."

—B.J. SCHECTER

Seven of our top 10 defensive backs plied their trade on SEC fields in the past 20 years, which is a tribute to the rise in prominence of the passing game and the increased value placed on the men who can stop it



TOP 10 *Defensive Backs*

1.

Champ Bailey

Georgia, 1996–98

“One of the SEC’s most accomplished athletes ever, Bailey in 1998 not only played 547 snaps on defense, but also 301 on offense and 109 on special teams. He won that year’s Nagurski Award as the country’s best defensive player.”

—TIM LAYDEN

ALL-EVERYTHING

In 1998 Bailey had 52 tackles and three interceptions, 47 catches for 744 yards and five touchdowns, plus 16 carries for 84 yards.

Photograph by Bob Rosato

2.



Patrick Peterson

LSU, 2008-10

"An elite playmaker, Peterson made an impact in every game he appeared in. In 2010, he was named both the SEC's defensive player of the year and the special teams player of the year, an unprecedented feat."

—B.J. SCHECTER

5.



Terry Hoage

Georgia, 1980-83

"Hoage had 12 interceptions in 1982, an SEC record, and as a senior he was fifth in Heisman voting. Bulldogs coach Vince Dooley said, 'Hoage is the best defensive player I've coached and maybe the best I've ever seen.'"

—WILLIAM F. REED

3.



Eric Berry

Tennessee, 2007-09

"The show was just starting when this sensational ballhawk picked off a pass. A transcendent athlete, Berry finished his career with 494 interception return yards, second-most in the history of Division I-A."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

6.



Carlos Rogers

Auburn, 2002-04

"Rogers was the defensive leader of an Auburn team that went 13-0 and was ranked No. 2 in the nation in 2004. A physical defender, Rogers was given the Jim Thorpe Award in '04 as the nation's best defensive back."

—TIM LAYDEN

4.



Tommy Casanova

LSU, 1969-71

"Casanova shut down opposing receivers so thoroughly that opposing quarterbacks usually ignored his side of the field. If his DB work hadn't limited his carries, Casanova probably would have been All-America at tailback too."

—ANDY STAPLES

7.



Reggie Nelson

Florida, 2005-06

"Nelson's ability to patrol the entire back third of the field by himself on the Gators' 2006 title team allowed the defense to blitz aggressively, and his vicious hits forced receivers to rethink how badly they wanted to catch the ball."

—ANDY STAPLES



8.

Jake Scott

Georgia, 1967–68

“Although he played only two seasons at Georgia before going to the CFL for the 1969 season, the ’68 SEC player of the year hauled in 16 career interceptions. Scott’s 315 career yards on interception returns is still the Bulldogs record.”

—WILLIAM F. REED

9.



Lito Sheppard

Florida, 1999–2001

“Opposing quarterbacks rarely threw in the direction of Sheppard. He had only eight career interceptions, but he was twice named All-SEC because of the way he blanketed the conference’s top wide receivers each week.”

—LARS ANDERSON

10.



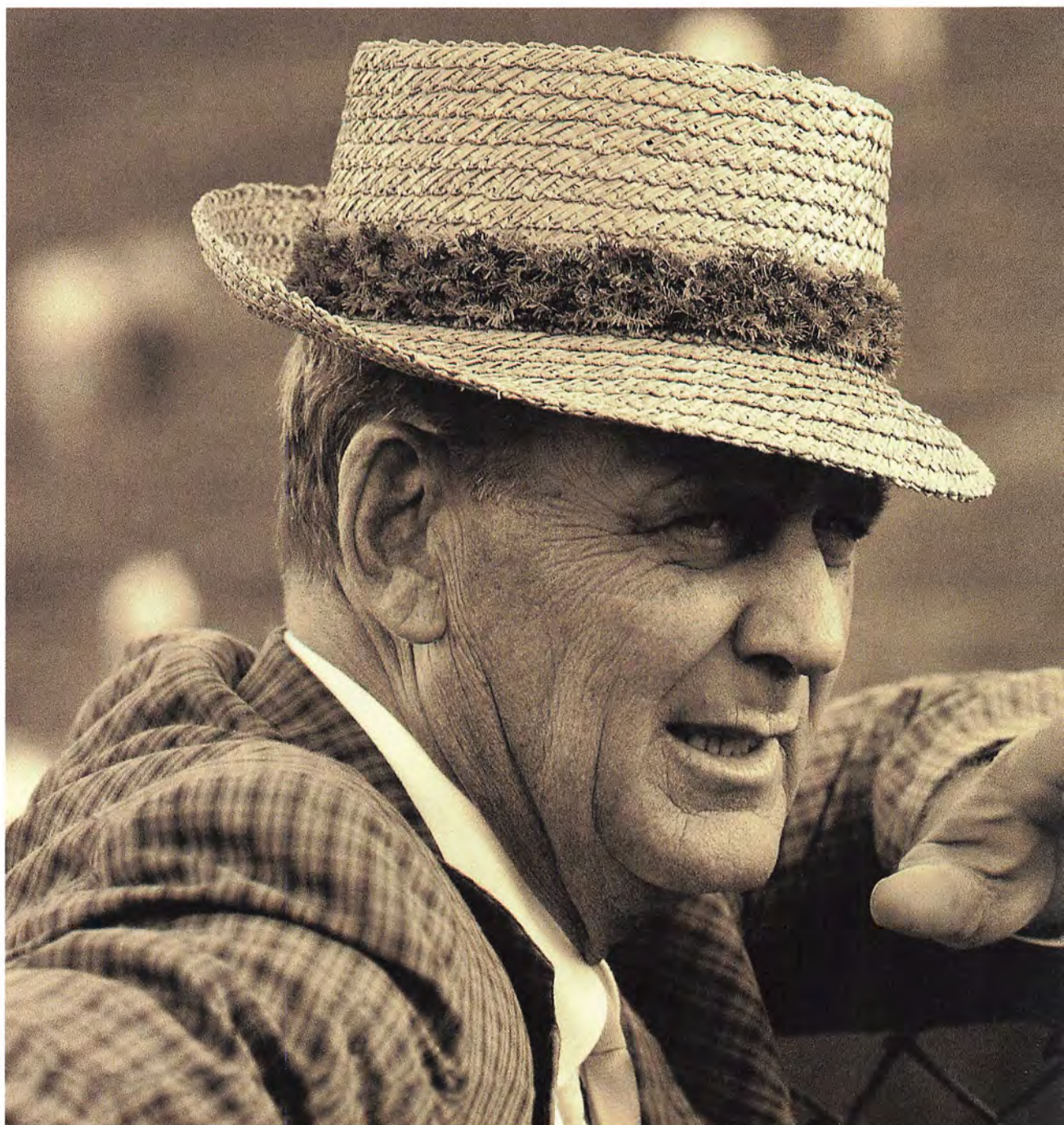
LaRon Landry

LSU, 2003–06

“His stats, though superb—315 tackles, 12 picks—don’t tell the story of this enforcer whose violent hits preyed on the minds of opposing skill players. Many incompletions owed to receivers’ hearing his footsteps.”

—AUSTIN MURPHY

TOP 10 *Coac*



hes

With players who leave their schools in four years or less, it's more often a coach who can define a college program, or even a conference, and become the image of enduring success

1.

Paul (Bear) Bryant

Kentucky, 1946–53
Alabama, 1958–82

“On a Mount Rushmore of SEC luminaries, his is the first face you sculpt. (Good luck with the houndstooth hat.) He won six national titles and 13 SEC crowns. A three-time national coach of the year, he now has one such award named for him.”

—AUSTIN MURPHY

THE WINNER

Of Bryant's 323 career wins, 232 of them (and all of his national titles) came at Alabama, where he had been an all-SEC end in the 1930s.

Photograph by Jay Leviton-Atlanta

2.



Nick Saban

LSU, 2000–04
Alabama 2007–present

"The master of the Process—a system that emphasizes incremental achievement—he won his first national title at LSU in 2003 and then led Alabama to three more in '09, '11 and '12."

—ANDY STAPLES

3.



Steve Spurrier

Florida, 1990–2001
South Carolina, 2005–present

"He won the 1966 Heisman at Florida, then coached the Gators to six SEC titles and the '96 national championship. After an NFL stint, he has taken South Carolina to new heights."

—WILLIAM F. REED

4.



Robert Neyland

Tennessee, 1926–34,
'36–40, '46–52

"Country tough. Those are the words that best describe the teams of Gen. Robert Neyland. He won a school record 173 games, and a stunning 112 of those victories were shutouts."

—LARS ANDERSON

5.

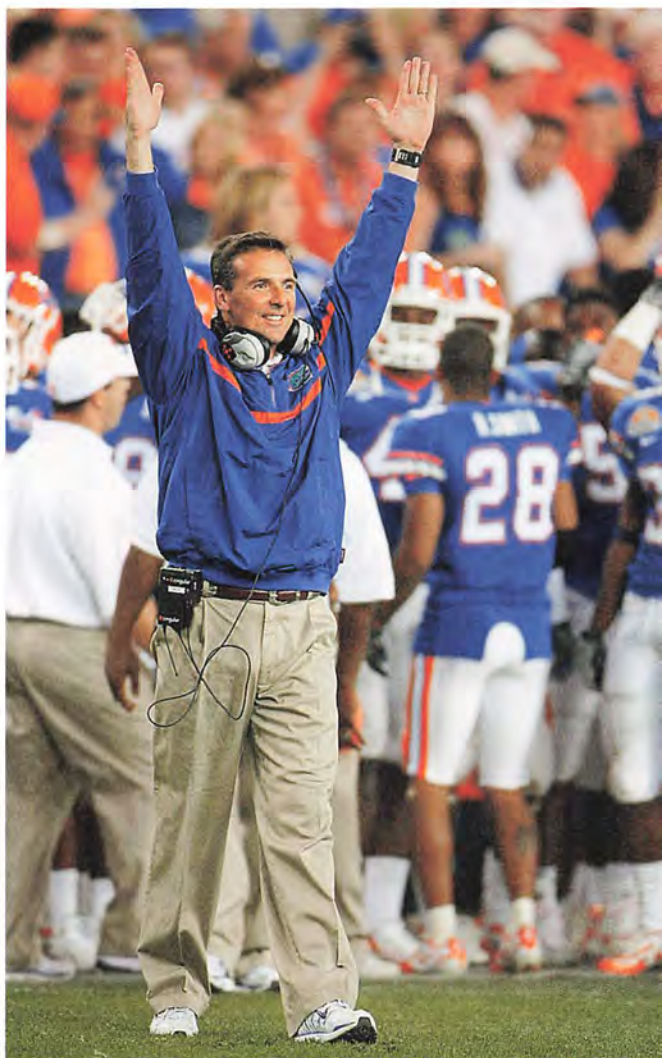


Vince Dooley

Georgia, 1964–88

"An Auburn graduate, Dooley was named head coach at Georgia when he was just 31 years old. He won 201 games, six SEC titles and the 1980 national championship, after which he turned down a chance to return to Auburn."

—TIM LAYDEN



6.



Johnny Vaught

Mississippi, 1947-70, '73

"Vaught, the winningest coach in Ole Miss history, also changed the game. His offenses, among the first to move the quarterback out of the pocket using bootlegs and sprint-outs, influenced nearly every offensive coordinator."

—ANDY STAPLES

8.



Pat Dye

Auburn, 1981-92

"A former Georgia all-SEC lineman and defensive assistant under Bear Bryant, Dye had a 99-39-4 record in his 12 seasons on The Plains. He led the Tigers to four SEC titles, including three straight from 1987 to '89."

—B.J. SCHECTER

7.

Urban Meyer

Florida, 2005-10

"Truncated by burnout, his reign was short but supremely sweet: two national titles and a Heisman winner. By taking the 2014 national title at Ohio State, Meyer made the case for himself as one of the game's best ever."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

9.



Ralph (Shug) Jordan

Auburn, 1951-75

"Jordan won 176 games laboring in the shadow of Bear Bryant. His 1957 team went 10-0 with a 40-0 win over Bama and was declared AP's national champion, though it was ineligible for a bowl due to SEC sanctions."

—WILLIAM F. REED

10.

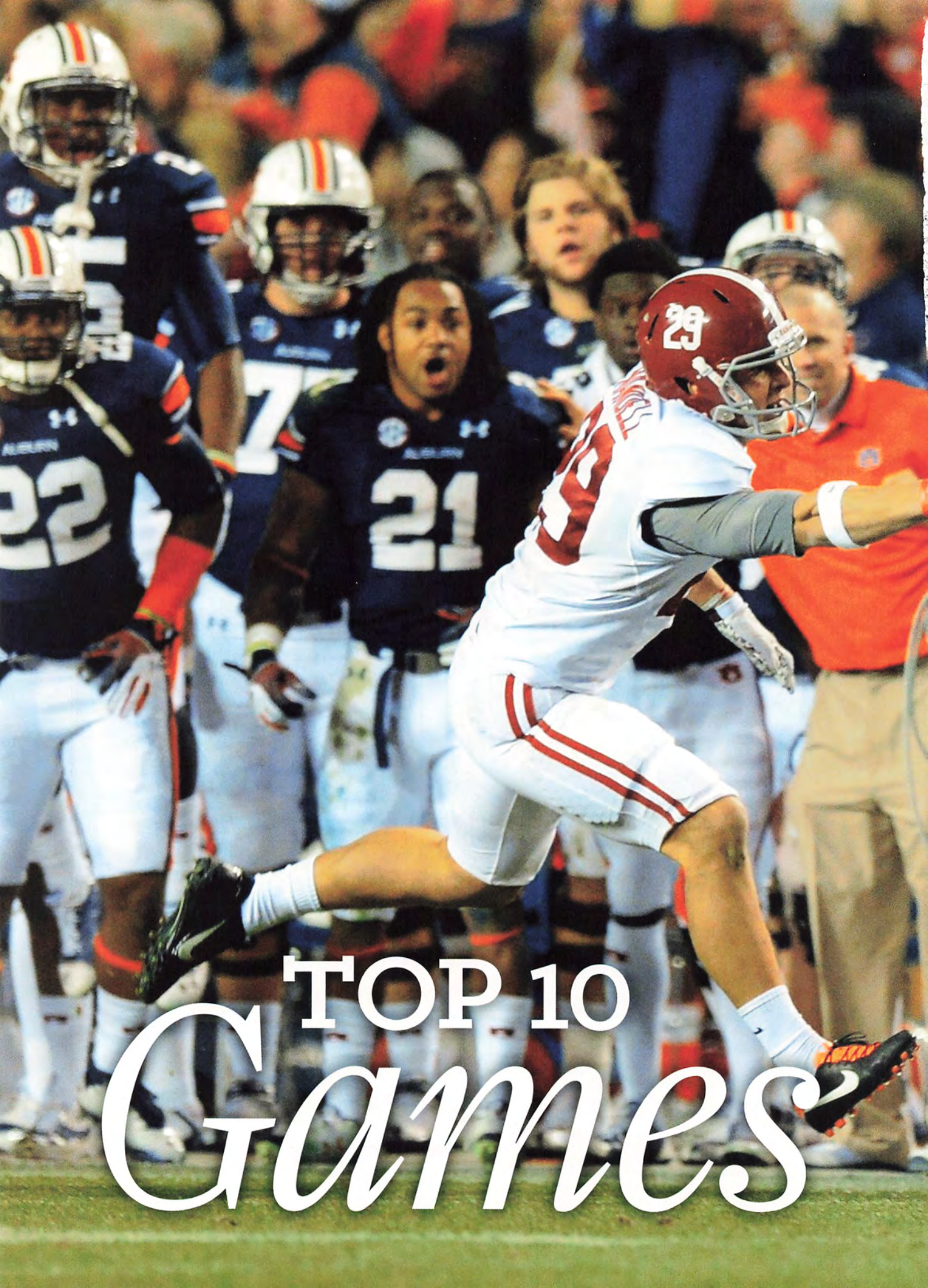


Johnny Majors


Tennessee, 1977-92

"Telegenic, quick-witted and one of the top recruiters of his time, Majors enjoyed 12 winning seasons in his 16 years at Rocky Top. From 1985 to '90, his Volunteers won three SEC championships."

—LARS ANDERSON



TOP 10
Games



Alabama played in seven of our Top 10 games, far more than any other team, but the Crimson Tide comes out on the winning end of these matchups only twice. It's wildly unrepresentative of Alabama's history of success, but telling in this way: It's really exciting when you take down the king



IRON LIKES

Davis's shocking runback (No. 21, Tre Mason, can't believe what he's seeing) highlights one of three Iron Bowl wins for Auburn in our Top 10.

Photograph by
John David Mercer/USA Today Sports

1.

Auburn 34 Alabama 28

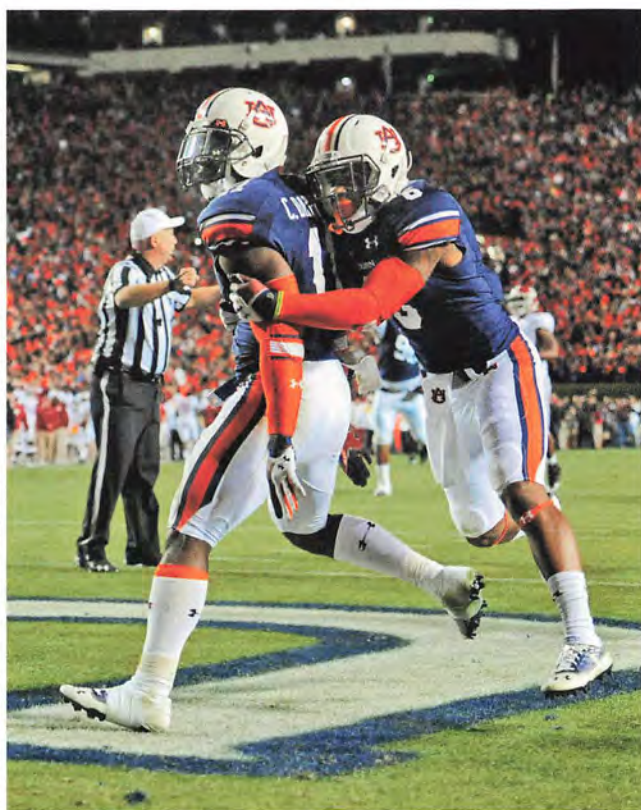
November 30, 2013

"Arguably the greatest game in college football history. After Alabama's 57-yard field goal attempt fell short as time expired, Auburn's Chris Davis caught the ball in the Tigers' end zone and raced 109 yards for the winning touchdown."

—B.J. SCHECTER

RETURNING THE FAVOR

Alabama's attempt at a long game-winning field goal turned out to be the spark that ignited mayhem at Auburn's Jordan-Hare Stadium.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JOHN DAVID MERCER/USA TODAY SPORTS; VASHA HUNT/AL.COM/LANDOV; RVR PHOTOS/USA TODAY SPORTS; SHANNA LOCKWOOD/USA TODAY SPORTS

The Vault

Excerpted from SI December 30, 2013

A stunning defeat of Alabama gave Auburn fans a one-of-a-kind thrill as they marveled for days and weeks about how the greatest of all Iron Bowls turned their way

by LARS ANDERSON

MORE THAN MOST of us, Alvino Porter has an appreciation for toilet paper. A former Army officer, Porter served tours in Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan. When he patrolled in mountains, deserts and the war-torn countryside, locating a roll of two-ply was a critical mission. "It's a raw necessity of life," says Porter, 32, now co-manager of a Walmart. "It's a little different in Auburn, but lately people here have really, really needed it."

Since at least 1972, after Tigers running back Terry Henley promised to "beat the number two" out of second-ranked Alabama, fans have commemorated victories by gathering toilet paper and heading to Toomer's Corner—named for Toomer's drug store (established: 1896)—where two 30-foot trees used to frame the main entrance to the school. The 130-year-old oaks were removed after a Bama fan poisoned them in 2010, but Auburn backers continue to revel at College Street and Magnolia Avenue by slinging rolls of tissue over the streetlight wires and the limbs of the dozens of oak trees still standing.

This November saw two miraculous plays, the first a 73-yard, fourth-down, last-minute against No. 25 Georgia and then an even more improbable kick return against top-ranked Alabama that led to the TP-ing of Toomer's. These heroics weren't just about winning and losing; they were about the lives they touched.

The Kick Six took place on Nov. 30. With one second remaining in the fourth quarter Alabama and Auburn are tied at 28. The Crimson Tide have the ball on the Tigers' 39-yard line.

In the locker room before the game Auburn alum Charles Barkley gives a pep talk. "Everybody is talking about Alabama playing for the national championship," he says, his voice rising. "But you can be the greatest team in Auburn history!" After his speech, Barkley watches from a private suite above the student section.



As the game clock expires, Auburn senior safety Chris Davis drives running back T.J. Yeldon out-of-bounds. Yet there is no signal from the refs. Buddy Davidson, 74, a lifelong Auburn fan and sideline marshal in his normal position with the Jordan-Hare chain gang, asks an official, "Why aren't they tossing the coin for overtime?"

"[Tide coach Nick] Saban is lobbying to get a second back," the official says. "He wants to try a field goal."

After a video review, a second is put on the clock. Saban sends his backup kicker, freshman Adam Griffith, onto the field. Davis, who is still panting from the previous play, stands on the right edge of the line of scrimmage while safety Ryan Smith drifts back into the end zone. No one instructed Smith to drop deep, but, he says later, "I wanted to return the ball."

"Let's freeze the kicker," Auburn coach Gus Malzahn says into his headset. He signals for a timeout. Defensive coordinator Ellis Johnson, sitting in the press box, tells coach Rodney Garner, who oversees the field goal block unit, "We need to put one of our return guys deep." Malzahn agrees and tells Davis, who leads the SEC in punt return average, to stand with the back of his cleats on the end line.

As the teams line up, a friend nudges Barkley in their suite: "Bama has just got big offensive linemen in there with no athletic ability. Wow. We might have a chance to return this." On the field Davidson playfully punches a member of the chain gang in the shoulder and says, "If the kick is short, Chris has got a shot to knock it down because he's got a great vertical leap."

Auburn fan Jason McKinney, in his living room, hops onto the floor and presses close to his television. He is a jangle of nerves. Alabama fan Kennon Whaley and his eight-year-old son, Kace, stand in section 35, row 11, seats 1 and 2. And Hayden Hart, 15, rises from his front-row seat in the end zone and leans over the railing, screaming as if trying to raise the dead.

The ball is snapped, and Griffith gives it a boot. The kick sails toward the goalposts and fades slightly to the right. The try comes up short, falling into Davis's arms, prompting an *ahhh* of relief from the home side. Davis runs three steps forward then makes a slight cut to his right. The move right signals to the rest of the Tigers' special-teamers that the return will actually go left, as it would on a punt return. In a heartbeat every Auburn blocker sprints to the left sideline to form a wall, and the Alabama players—most of whom had watched the kick rather than run toward the ball—are slow to react.

As Davis gathers speed and blows past the only Bama defenders who have a chance to push him out-of-bounds, pandemonium erupts. In his suite, Barkley screams, "Don't fall down! Don't fall down!" Kace Whaley frantically asks his daddy, "Why don't they tackle him? Why don't they tackle him?"

Barkley watches the eruption of joy. Chills sweep over his body. "The elation was something I'll never experience again," he says.

Davis crosses into the end zone and collapses, then disappears under a dog pile. The student section bull-rushes a fence, pushes past security, tramples a flower bed and charges onto the field, some jumping onto the dog pile. Special teams coach Scott Fountain sprints to the pile and lifts fans away. "Chris couldn't breathe," says Fountain. "It looked like Bourbon Street out there."

In the far end zone Hayden Hart leaps out of the stands, losing his right shoe, and runs toward Malzahn. Hart has a collection of gloves and wristbands Auburn players have thrown to him, and he wants to add to his trove. He squeezes through the crowd, slips past Melvin Owens, the university police officer assigned to Malzahn—"People were high-fiving me just because I was close to Coach," Owens says—and lunges over several people to grab Malzahn's visor. Putting the visor around his neck, Hart turns and weaves back to his seat to find his shoe.

Fans keep pouring onto the turf. Dozens of students cannonball into the prickly-leaved holly bushes that ring the field. Others lock arms and, three- and four-wide, plow a path into the heart of the celebration. Reportedly one fan tears an ACL, one breaks an ankle and at least three lose their cellphones. Within minutes thousands of fans make it onto the field, jumping for joy on the grass. Eric Kleypas, the director of athletic turf, is one of them. "I couldn't help myself," he says.

Barkley watches the eruption of joy from his suite. The NBA Hall of Famer and a two-time Olympic gold medalist has never seen such a spontaneous, large-scale explosion of raw emotion. Chills sweep over his body. "The elation was something I'll never experience again," he says.

Davidson charges onto the field and hands a penalty sheet to one of Saban's assistants, then dodges fans on his way to the Auburn locker room. He puts Malzahn's copy in his briefcase and realizes he's one of the only ones in the locker room. He closes his eyes and drinks in the triumph, reminding himself to never forget how delicious this feels after the years of devotion, the million-plus miles he has traveled by planes, trains and buses. He is at the pinnacle of fandom. "Best game ever," he says to himself. "Best game ever."

The CBS cameras come to rest on Kace, standing in his Alabama sweatshirt with tears leaking down his face. Kennon, a youth football coach, sits his boy down on the bleachers. "You can't win every game," he tells his son. "When you lose like this, remember the feeling. And then the next day you use that feeling to work harder to get better." Before kickoff Kennon had been weighed with worry about the five businesses he owns and his 100 employees. But those concerns have disappeared for now. Later, at the family's tailgate, father and son play catch and Kace climbs magnolia trees.

At a nearby campground Hart rejoins friends, Malzahn's visor glued to his head. He'll sleep in it that night and wear it to school the following Monday, before hanging it in his bedroom from the tip of a Japanese sword. He'll email Malzahn, offering to return the visor, but hear nothing back. "I try not to wear it," he says, "but sometimes I just can't help myself. Maybe its power will wear off on me."

Fifteen minutes after the game Sheena McKinney posts a clip on YouTube. After the touchdown Jason grabbed

their 11-year-old son, Bradley, who was sitting in a chair, and tackled him to the ground. Jason screamed like he was experiencing rapture, which Sheena gets on video. Within a week Jason and Bradley will appear on ESPN's *College GameDay*, and their postgame antics will garner more than 68,000 views. "My biggest thrill," says Jason, "was seeing everything through the eyes of my son. He was so happy. It brought us closer."

TWO WEEKS LATER it still feels like the day after in Auburn. At Walmart, Alvino Porter continues to marvel at how much toilet paper has been sold in the previous month. At Byron's Smokehouse on Opelika Road an image of Chris Davis's 109-yard dash repeatedly flashes on a flat screen. "No game will ever touch this Iron Bowl," says 78-year-old Byron Gullede, the father of the owner. At Toomer's Corner small strips of toilet paper still cling to wires and branches.

At Jordan-Hare Stadium the reminders are everywhere. Dozens of fans used pocket knives and keys to carve up slices of the field. More than 1,000 fans had broken off twigs from the holly bushes as souvenirs.

At the 37-yard line on the Auburn side lies more evidence that the two plays had stirred something deep in the Tigers' faithful. In the chaotic aftermath of the Iron Bowl a fan dumped the ashes of a loved one on the field. Kleypas removed the remains two days later, but now, on a wintery, windy early evening, he notices something in the grass.

"Look," he says, plucking a tiny piece of bone from the ground. "I guess we didn't get all of it." Kleypas drops the fragment back onto the field and walks off into the gathering dusk. The sliver of bone nestles deep into the grass. For that Auburn fan and every other one, all wishes—final and football—were granted this autumn. □



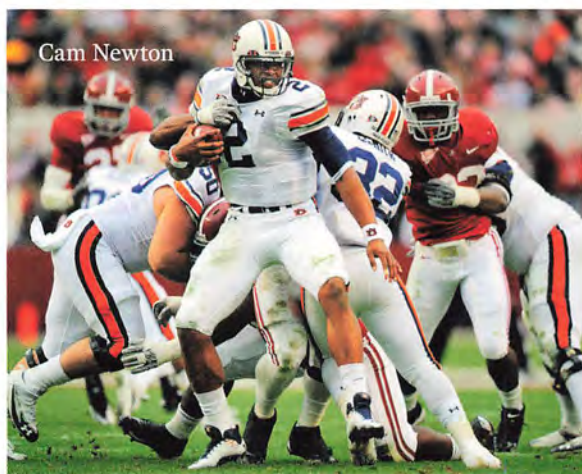
2.

LSU 7 Mississippi 3

October 31, 1959

"The Rebels led the defending national champs 3-0 in the fourth quarter. But then Billy Cannon took in a punt at his own 11 and dodged his way to immortality, eluding at least seven tacklers with clear shots."

—WILLIAM F. REED



Cam Newton

3.

Auburn 28 Alabama 27

November 26, 2010

"After laughing as Cam Newton was mocked during warmups ('Son of a Preacher Man' played on the P.A.), then exulting as the Tide jumped to an early 24-0 lead, Bama fans fell silent as Newton rallied Auburn to a win."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

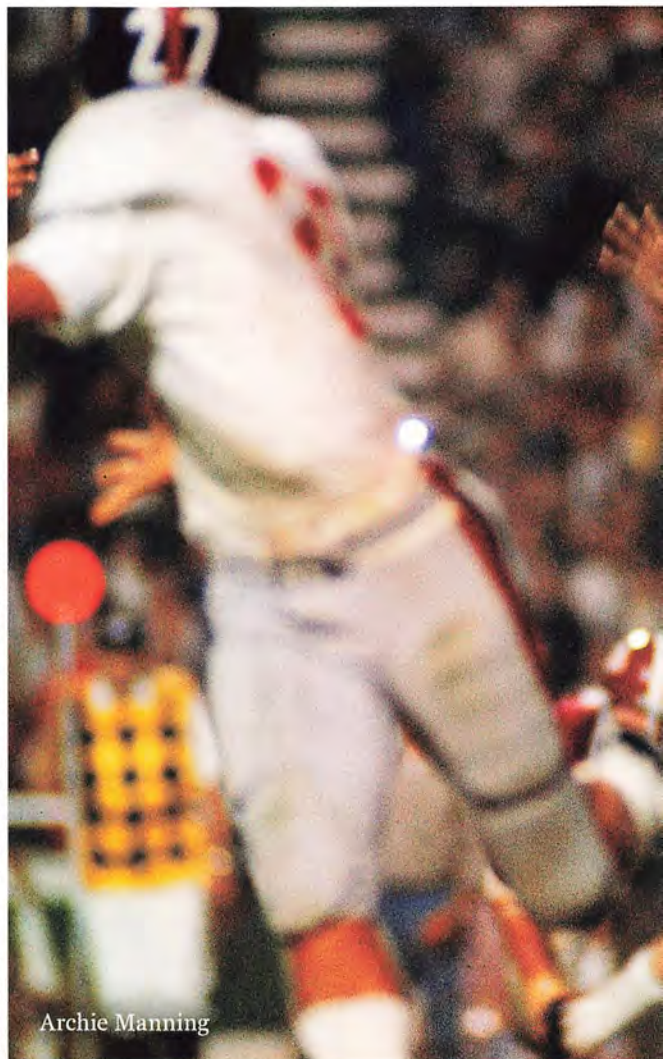
4.

Alabama 33 Mississippi 32

October 4, 1969

In an era when televised college football games were few, ABC put the No. 15 Tide and the No. 20 Rebels in prime time. Bama won the game, but Archie Manning stole the evening, with 436 yards passing and 104 yards rushing.

—TIM LAYDEN



Archie Manning

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BOB ROSATO; AUBURN UNIVERSITY MEDIA RELATIONS; BILL FRANKS; NEIL LEIFER

Auburn's block party



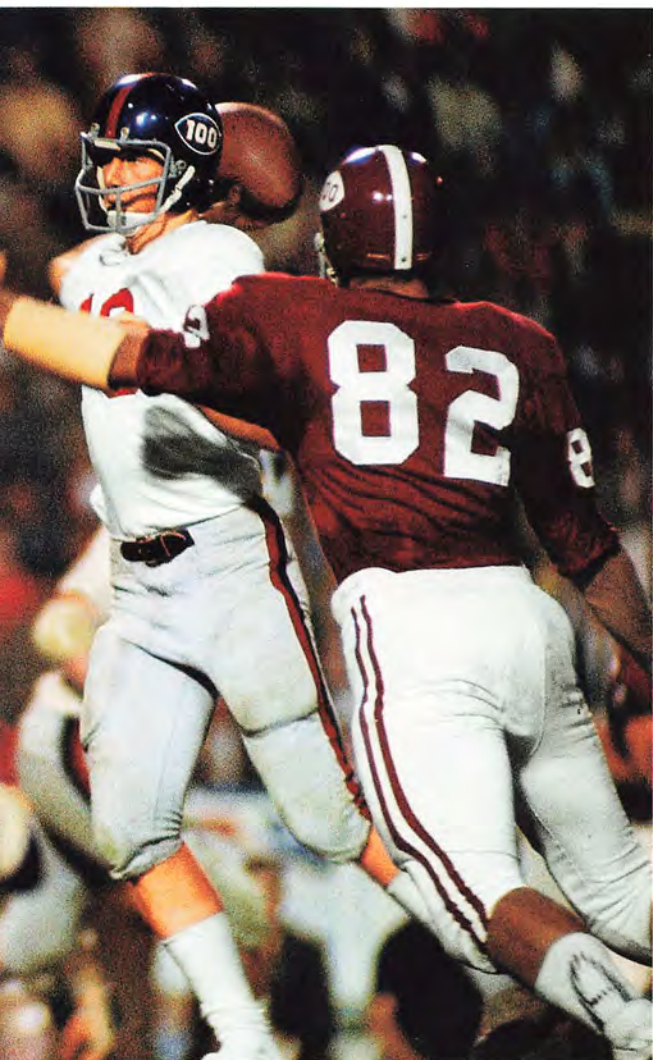
5.

Auburn 17 Alabama 16

December 2, 1972

"'Punt, Bama, Punt.' Trailing 16-3 in the fourth quarter, the Tigers' David Langner returned a blocked punt for a TD. Then, minutes later, Langner scooped up another blocked punt and scored the game-winner."

—LARS ANDERSON



Tim Tebow

6.

Florida 31 Alabama 20

December 6, 2008

"In perhaps the most memorable game of Tim Tebow's career, the Gators earned the right to play for the national championship. Tebow, facing a 20-17 fourth-quarter deficit, led Florida on two touchdown drives."

—TIM LAYDEN

7.

Alabama 32 Georgia 28

December 1, 2012

"The teams competed for the right to wallop Notre Dame in the BCS title game. Alabama took the lead on a 45-yard touchdown pass with 3:15 remaining, and the Tide defense stopped Georgia five yards from the end zone as time expired."

—ANDY STAPLES



The Alabama defense

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BILL FRANKS; ANDY HAYT; PATRICIA MILKLIK/MONTGOMERY ADVERTISER/AP; DUSTY PERKINS

8.

Mississippi State 6 Alabama 3

November 1, 1980

"Alabama entered the game as the two-time defending national champs and riding a 28-game winning streak. But after two field goals, Mississippi State fans could claim, 'I was there when we beat the Bear.'"

—B.J. SCHECTER



MSU's Mardye McDole



Lindsay Scott

9.

Georgia 26 Florida 21

November 8, 1980

"Georgia trailed by two and was stuck on its own seven-yard line with a minute remaining when Buck Belue rolled right and found Lindsay Scott across the middle. Scott then won a footrace and Georgia stayed undefeated."

—ANDY STAPLES



UGA and Robert Baker

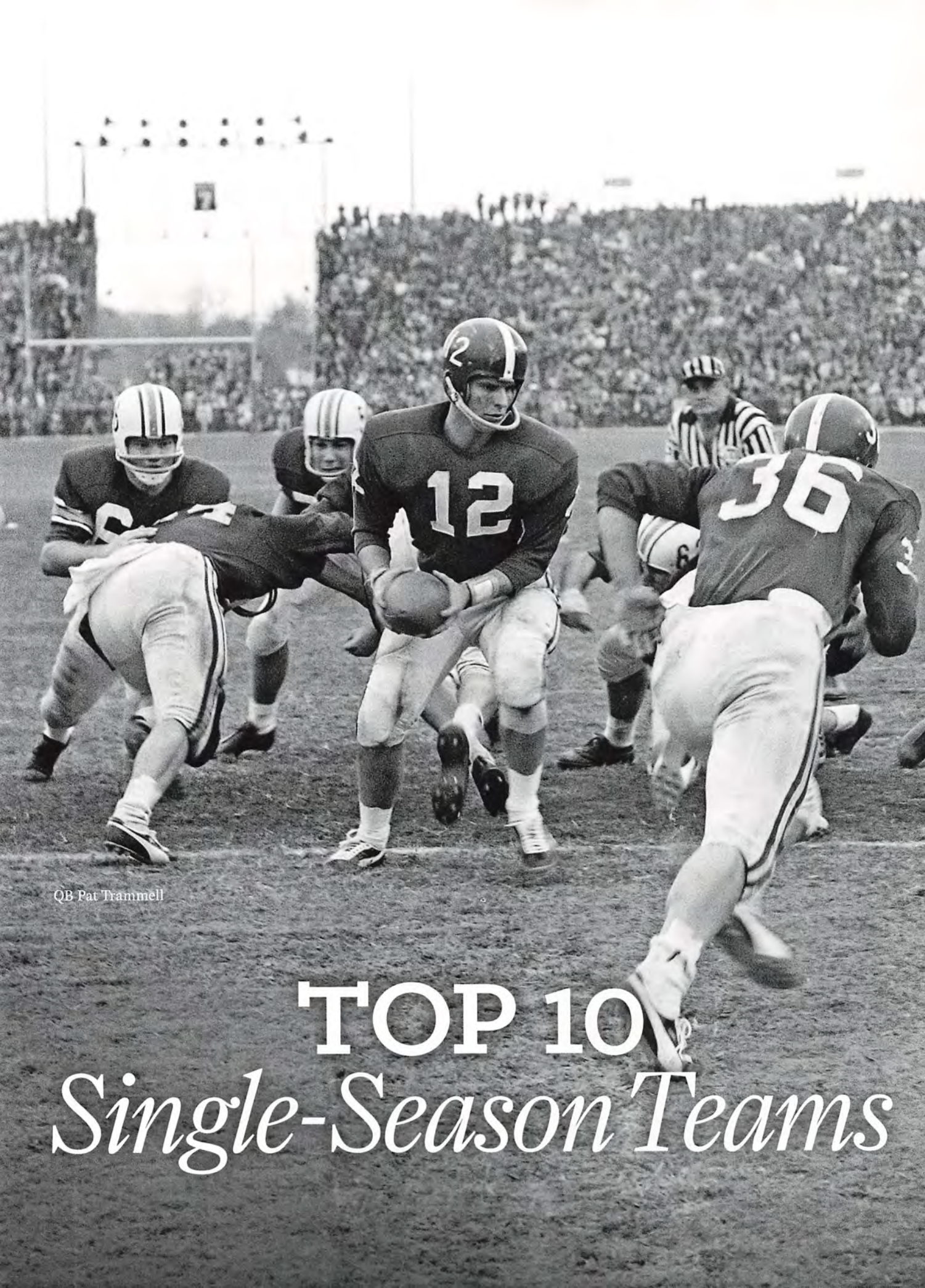
10.

Georgia 56 Auburn 49 (4 OT)

November 16, 1996

"Even UGA V, the Georgia mascot, joined the fray, lunging at an Auburn receiver. By outscoring the Tigers 21-0 in the second half, the Dawgs forced overtime. Four OT periods and seven touchdowns later, Georgia wins."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



QB Pat Trammell

TOP 10 *Single-Season Teams*

The SEC began play in 1933, and one season later Alabama claimed the conference's first national championship. But it's recently that the conference has been really great, winning titles in eight of the last 12 seasons, with three of those teams making our all-time list

1.

Alabama 1961

11-0 Bear Bryant, coach

"The '61 Bama squad delivered Bryant his first national title as the Tide's head coach. How ruthlessly dominating was this Alabama team? The Tide shut out six of its opponents and outscored teams by a total of 297 to 25."

—LARS ANDERSON



Steadman Shealy

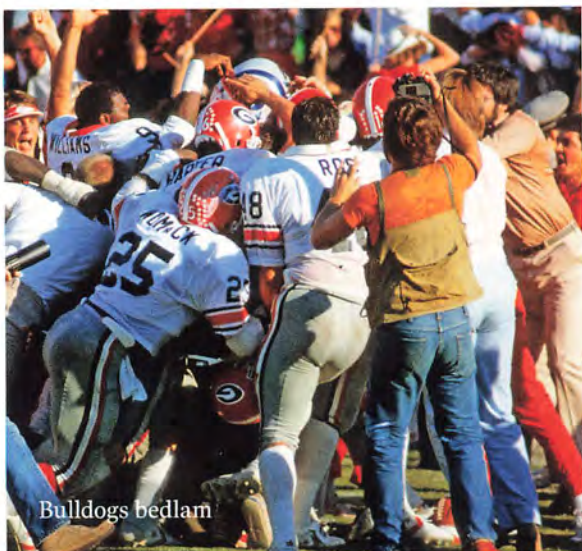
2.

Alabama 1979

12-0 Bear Bryant, coach

"This was the last of Bryant's six national title teams and clearly one of his best. It defended the Tide's 1978 national title with an undefeated season in which Alabama scored 383 points while limiting opponents to 67."

—WILLIAM F. REED



Bulldogs bedlam

3.

Georgia 1980

12-0 Vince Dooley, coach

"The Bulldogs' first real win came on Easter Sunday when Herschel Walker signed. Georgia needed Lindsay Scott's miracle dash to beat Florida, plus a beaping helping of Walker runs, to complete their season undefeated."

—ANDY STAPLES



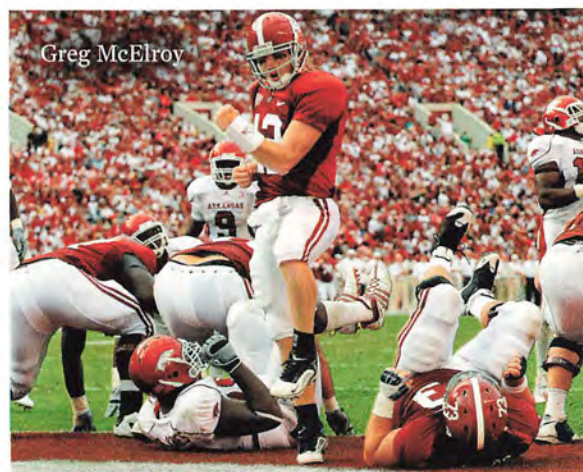
4.

Alabama 2009

14-0 Nick Saban, coach

"Led by Heisman-winning back Mark Ingram, the Tide took its first national title since 1992. Bama avenged a 2008 loss to Florida in the SEC title game and then steamrolled Texas 37-21 in the national championship."

—TIM LAYDEN



Greg McElroy



Cam Newton

5.

Auburn 2010

14-0 *Gene Chizik, coach*

"This Tigers squad may have been the most entertaining in SEC history, winning six games by a TD or less on the way to a national title. Transfer Cam Newton arrived like a supernova, winning the Heisman in a landslide."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



Mickey Mangham

6.

LSU 1958

11-0 *Paul Dietzel, coach*

"Led by future Heisman Trophy winner Billy Cannon, the Tigers went undefeated and won the SEC and national titles. Dietzel's team was built around defense; LSU held all but one opponent to seven points or less."

—B.J. SCHECTER

7.

Florida 1996

12-1 Steve Spurrier, coach

"How were Reidel Anthony and Jacquez Green and the rest of Danny Wuerffel's receivers always so open? Spurrier's outrageously prolific Fun-n-Gun attack wrongfooted the run-first SEC and earned the Gators their first national title."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



8.

Tennessee 1998

13-0 Phillip Fulmer, coach

"With Peyton Manning gone to the NFL, quarterback Tee Martin and linebacker Al Wilson unexpectedly carried the Vols to a national title that was sealed with a 23-16 win over Florida State in the Fiesta Bowl."

—TIM LAYDEN



Tee Martin

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROBERT ROGERS; AU PHOTO: POUYA DIANAT; AL TIELEMANS



Reidel Anthony



Jackie Burkett
and Zeke Smith

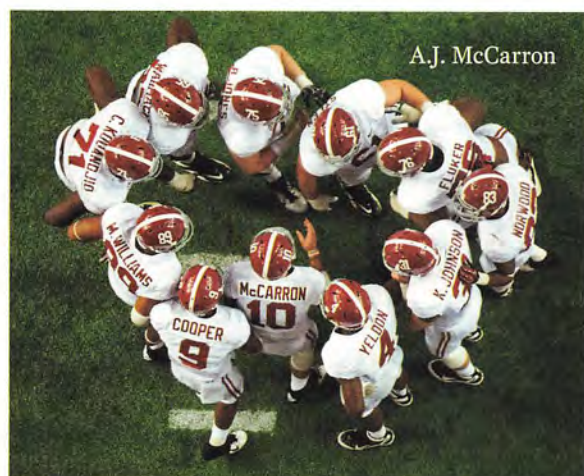
9.

Auburn 1957

10-0 *Shug Jordan, coach*

"Auburn began the '57 season ranked No. 15 in the AP poll. But led by a defense that surrendered only 28 points all year, the Tigers rolled through the regular season undefeated and won the AP national title."

—LARS ANDERSON



A.J. McCarron

10.

Alabama 2012

13-1 *Nick Saban, coach*

"An all-time great offensive line paved the way for a championship run that appeared in peril after a loss to Texas A&M. But the Tide edged Georgia in the SEC title game and crushed Notre Dame in the BCS championship."

—ANDY STAPLES

TOP 10 *Rivalries*

Given the intrastate conflicts, border tensions and long histories of teams dealing each other painful defeats, every SEC game represents a rivalry to some degree, but in the most fanatical of all football conferences, these games stand out for their intensity



1.

Alabama-Auburn

First meeting, 1893

"The fan bases live in the same state, marry each other, go to church together, hunt together. Alabama leads the series 43-35-1, but all that matters, really, is who won the last game. In a state with no pro sports, bragging rights are big."

—LARS ANDERSON

NEVER FOR NOTHING

The annual Iron Bowl game is regarded by many as the fiercest rivalry in all of college sports.

Photograph by Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images



3.

Mississippi- Mississippi State

First meeting, 1901

"After a brawl at the 1926 game, the schools decided that, to promote sportsmanship, a trophy should go to the winner. The trophy was intended to look like a football but more resembled an egg. So began the Egg Bowl."

—WILLIAM F. REED



The Golden Egg

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: BILL FRANKS (2)



The Cocktail Party

2.

Florida-Georgia

First meeting, 1915

"The World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party has produced indelible memories. From Run Lindsay Run to Steve Spurrier's '90s dominance to Fourth and Dumb, the series has never failed to entertain."

—ANDY STAPLES



The 2011 game (regular season)

4.

Alabama-LSU

First meeting, 1895

"The rivalry was never bigger than in a violent 9-6 LSU victory over the Tide in 2011, so tightly contested that the teams were matched again in the national championship game, won by Alabama, 21-0."

—TIM LAYDEN

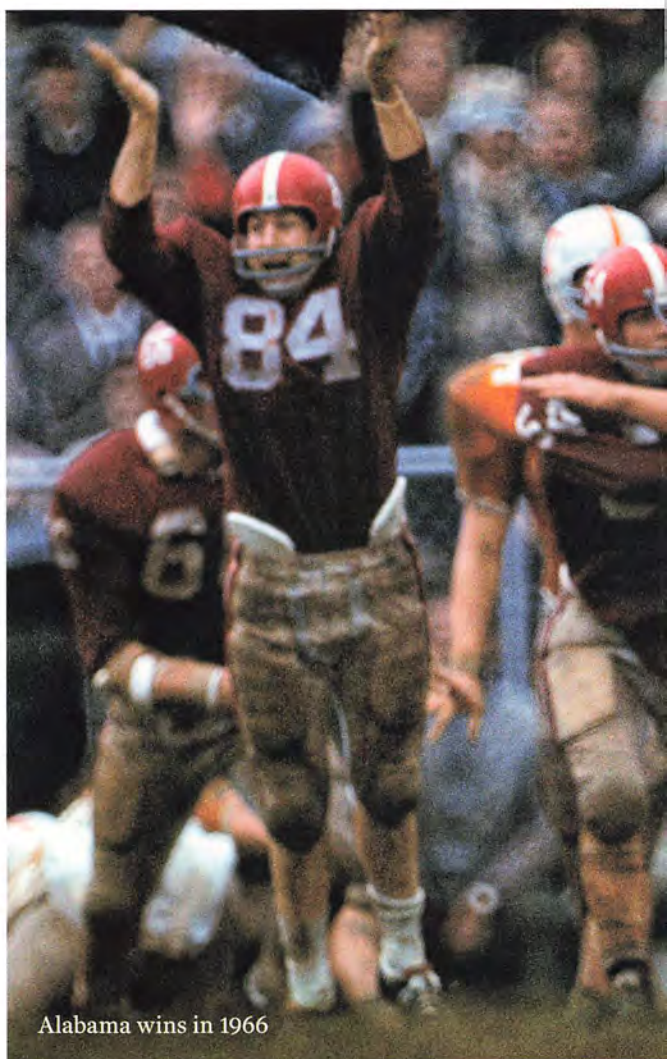
5.

Alabama-Tennessee

First meeting, 1901

"The Third Saturday in October is fascinating for its distinct eras. Tennessee swept from 1967 to '70, and Alabama responded by winning from 1971 to '81, beginning a trading of streaks back and forth. Alabama has won the past eight."

—ANDY STAPLES



Alabama wins in 1966



Nick Marshall

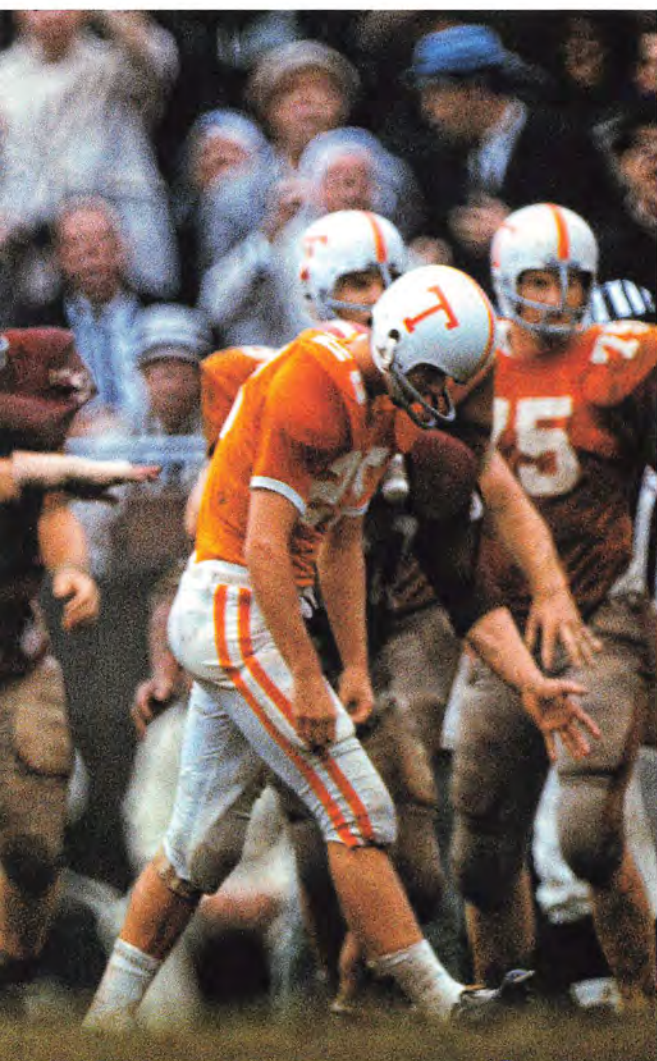
6.

Auburn-Georgia

First meeting, 1892

"In a conference that reveres its past, special status is accorded the Deep South's Oldest Rivalry (also, incidentally, one of its chippiest). Going into 2015, improbably, the series was tied 55-55-8."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



Tennessee RB
Cedric Houston

7.

Florida- Tennessee

First meeting, 1916

"This rivalry heated up when Vols coach Doug Dickey lost to alma mater Florida in a bowl and he left to become head coach in Gainesville. Tensions increased when Tennessee native Steve Spurrier took over at Florida."

—WILLIAM F. REED



8.

Arkansas- LSU

First meeting, 1901

"The 24-karat gold 'Golden Boot' trophy, awarded annually to the winner between the Razorbacks and Tigers, tips the scales at just over 200 pounds, making it the heaviest hardware in college football."

—LARS ANDERSON

9.

Auburn-LSU

First meeting, 1901

"This may not be the highest-profile rivalry in the SEC, but it's among the most heated and intense. The series became an annual one with the start of divisional play in 1992. LSU leads Auburn 27-21-1."

—B.J. SCHECTER



LSU's Demetrius Byrd

10.

Georgia-South Carolina

First meeting, 1894

"This conflict was front-burnered in 1992, when USC joined the SEC, and reached full boil in 2005, when USC hired Steve Spurrier. By beating the Bulldogs four times in the last five years, he ushered in a full-on border war."

—AUSTIN MURPHY

HOWDY, NEIGHBOR!

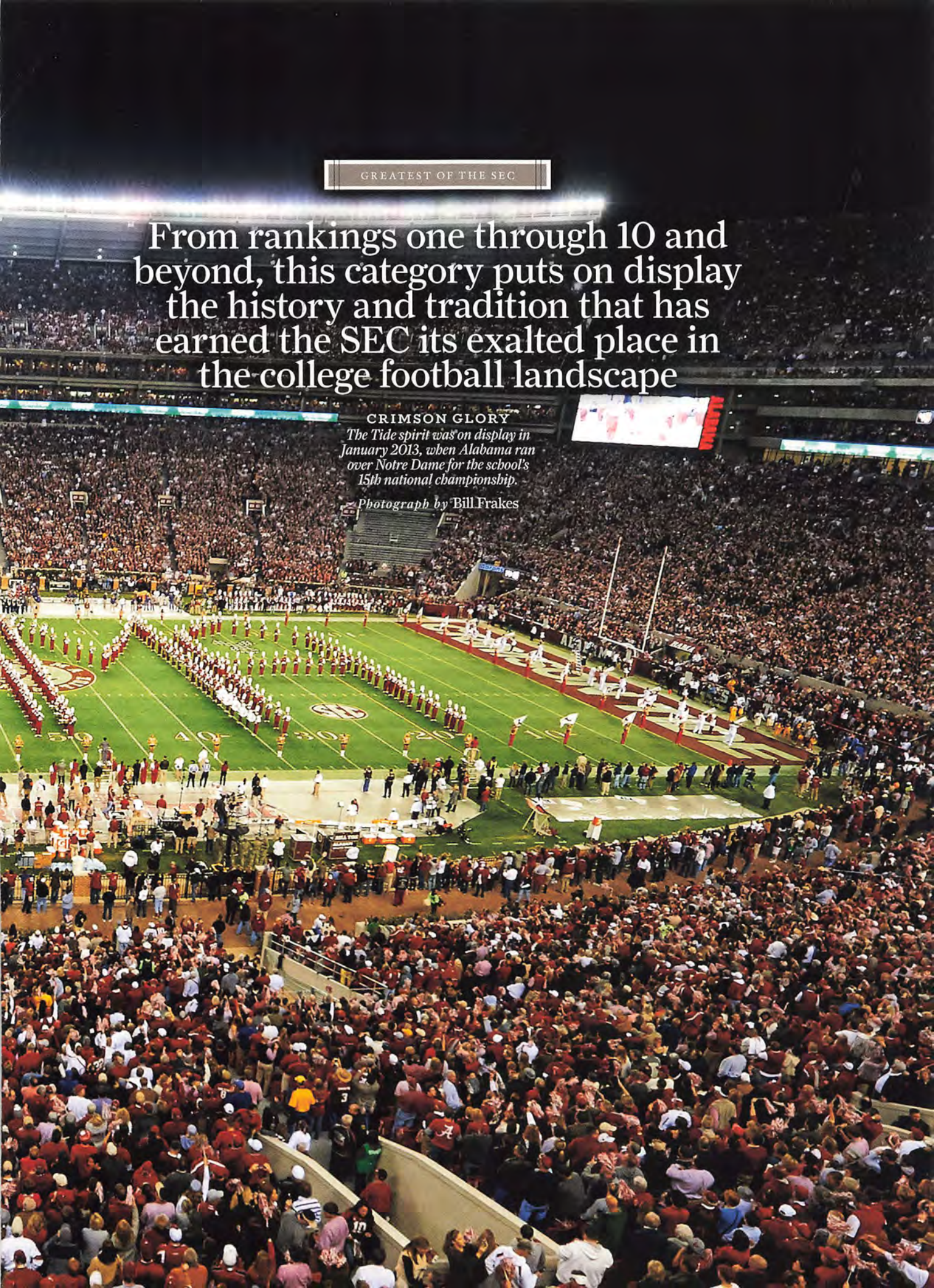
Georgia leads the series 47-18-2, but South Carolina has come on recently behind players such as running back Marcus Lattimore.

Photograph by Mike Zarrilli/Getty Images



A high-angle, wide shot of a football stadium at night. The stadium is packed with spectators, many wearing red. On the field, a marching band in white and red uniforms is performing. The field has yard lines and numbers visible. The stadium lights are on, and the sky is dark.

TOP 10 *Programs*



GREATEST OF THE SEC

From rankings one through 10 and beyond, this category puts on display the history and tradition that has earned the SEC its exalted place in the college football landscape

CRIMSON GLORY

The Tide spirit was on display in January 2013, when Alabama ran over Notre Dame for the school's 15th national championship.

Photograph by Bill Frakes

1.

University of Alabama

SEC founding member

"The Tide have 15 national championships, a .692 winning percentage and they've had two separate 28-game-winning streaks. And Alabama has had the SEC's two greatest coaches: Bear Bryant and Nick Saban."

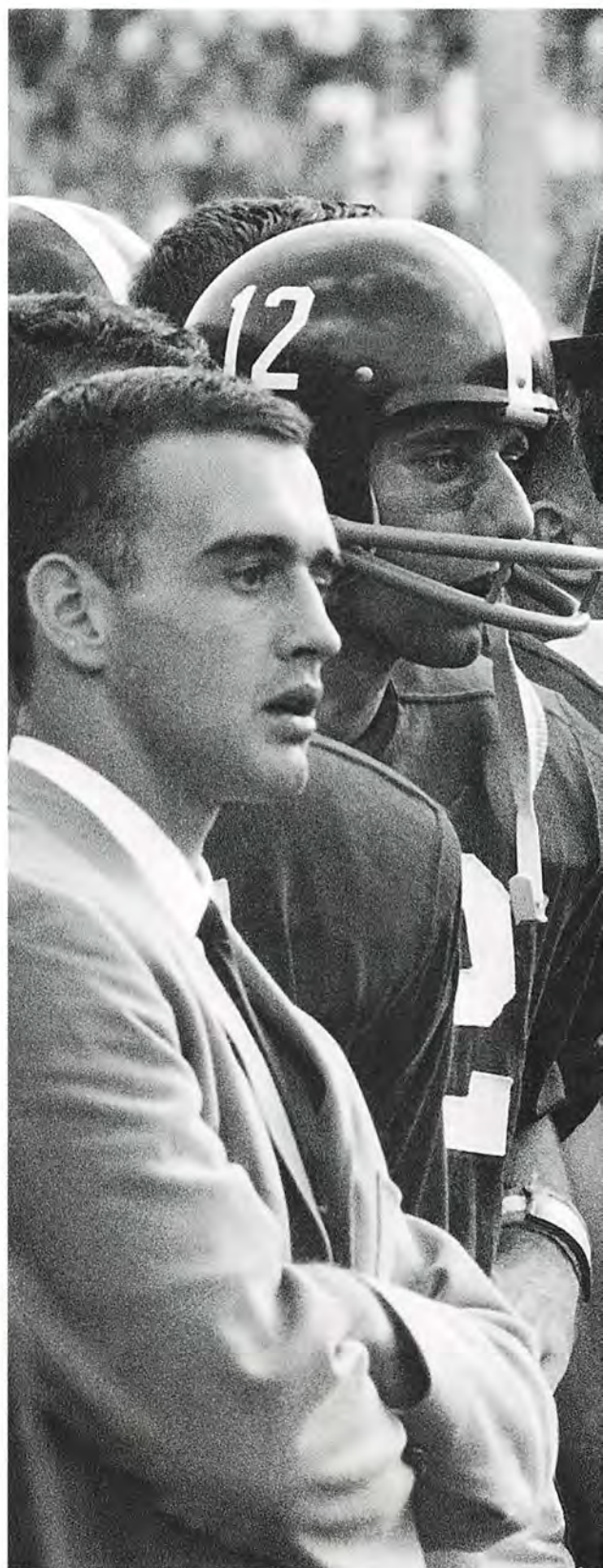
—B.J. SCHECTER



ATTRACTED OPPOSITES

After landing his prized recruit, Bryant gave the flamboyant kid from Pennsylvania freedom to throw the ball downfield.

Photograph by James Drake





The Vault

Excerpted from *SI Presents*, January 17, 2013

The unlikely union of Bear Bryant and Joe Namath set Alabama on a course of excellence that has lasted for half a century and counting

by RICHARD HOFFER

JOE NAMATH was in the wind. He couldn't go to Maryland after all. He'd come up short again on the SAT, by a few points this time. But before all 50-odd schools—Notre Dame, Michigan, Arizona State—could renew their recruitment, Bear Bryant swooped in. He liked those Western Pennsylvania gunslingers. At Kentucky he'd had good luck with George Blanda and Babe Parilli. Maybe Namath would provide more luck, now that Bryant was back home at Alabama. The Bear wasn't as particular about test scores as some.

He picked Howard Schnellenberger for the job, which was perfect. Schnellenberger was his ends coach, but he'd known Namath's brother Frank when the two played together at Kentucky. "Go get him," Bryant said. Schnellenberger went to the athletic director, who withdrew a gunnysack from under his desk and pulled out a fistful of \$5s and \$20s for the travel. He told Schnellenberger to go get him. Schnellenberger was beginning to understand that he was not to come back without this kid.

The first time Schnellenberger saw this . . . kid, he was leaning against a wall in the Blue Room, a pool hall in Beaver Falls and supposedly a steady source of income for Namath. He was 100% insolence. It took more than a week, Namath showing Schnellenberger around town, yanking his chain, everybody having a great time. Schnellenberger had packed for three days, and his shirts were moldering with wear. Also, he had begun kiting checks for his hotel stay, the petty cash long gone. Finally, on a Sunday, he was invited to dinner, chicken and dumplings, Namath's favorite dish. There was no longer any question of who was in charge here. The mother had much earlier quashed any idea of a professional baseball contract for her son with the mildly voiced wish that "Joey should go to college." The mother was in charge. After the dishes were cleared, Rose Namath went upstairs and brought Joey's bag down. "Take him," she said.

Schnellenberger, preferring a life of serial felonies to

disappointing Bear Bryant even once, wrote another bad check for Namath's plane ticket to Birmingham. Once there, he marched Namath immediately onto the football field, where Bryant was surveying practice from his tower. The tower was where players liked to see Bryant remain, at elevation and distance. The sound of the chain dropping as he prepared to descend would stiffen every player on the field. "Cinch you right up," one of them says.

But this was different. Bryant wasn't coming down. This was possibly more disturbing. Somebody thought the university president had once gone up the tower. Somebody else heard that one of Bryant's favorite comics had also gone up. Nobody else, though, had ever visited Bryant in his aerie. Until now. Bryant leaned over the rail and considered the recruit, the principal impression given by a blue straw hat with a feather jutting from the band. And there was a pearl involved too. Bryant might have been more amused than offended; he was a devotee of specialty hat wear himself. "Send that kid up here," Bryant bellowed through his bullhorn.

Namath climbed the ladder, and the two had a brief "talk," he says, Namath leaning in toward Bryant's low growl, his first taste of authentic Southern gibberish. Gaylon McColough, a freshman center on the field, asked a graduate assistant who that was. The assistant snorted in disgust, appalled by these changing times, the loss of decency everywhere, traditions crumbling before your eyes, the South down for the count, that's for sure. Bear Bryant had, on some kind of dangerous and shocking and maybe even obscene impulse, just invited Yankee Doodle Dandy into his sacred cockpit. The graduate assistant said, "That's your new quarterback."

WHEN BRYANT handed Namath the keys to his Alabama football team, anointing him his starter for the 1962 season (like all college athletes in those days, Namath had been ineligible for the varsity as a freshman), that single decision laid the groundwork for nearly half a century of excitement, nonsense and just general hullabaloo. Ideas of fame and celebrity, which govern sports to this day, originated with that spring's depth chart.

But what was Bryant supposed to do? Start Jack Hurlbut? Bryant had been at Alabama for four years and had just that previous season finally restored Crimson Tide glory with a national championship. But the 1961 season, great as it was, might have been remembered as little more than a fluke, a one-off. Nobody knew that better than Bryant. His All-America quarterback, Pat Trammell, was off to medical school, and many others were gone too. Altogether he was missing 14 lettermen from that team. And while he had a few returning stars—the great Lee Roy Jordan, a fierce tackler, comes to mind—hopes were not especially high. "A bunch of untried sophomores and a host of cripples" was the scouting report. From Alabama's own media guide.

Bryant was a man of few biases, so Namath's Northern ways were not going to put him off. Losing was what he was prejudiced against.

So just as Bryant unwittingly ushered in a great age of sports celebrity simply by tapping that Yankee on the top of his helmet, so too did he create one of college football's great dynasties, a period of dominance that included six national championships during his watch. And that continues a half century later, Alabama again a dominant team.

If that happens, though, it's worth pointing out that the source of such perpetual relevance, maybe unrivaled in any sport for so long, was Bryant's decision to place the university's hopes in a rather confident sophomore with challenging fashion ideas.

Bryant was a man of few biases, so Namath's Northern ways were certainly not going to put him off. Losing was what he was prejudiced against mainly. Besides, Namath was more than a pretty boy, a fashion plate. He was tough, hardened in Beaver Falls's Lower End in ways Bryant couldn't have expected. And he was an athlete, with gifts neither Bryant nor any of his players had ever seen. The players, few of whom were geographically inclined to cede him credit, were soon taken aback, their admiration at first grudging and then full-blown. Butch Henry, a sophomore end during Namath's freshman year, was watching Bryant boil over during a kicking drill, nobody able to get the ball deep enough for proper coverage. "Get Joe over here!" he bellowed through the bullhorn. Henry was eager to see this escapade unfold.

PERHAPS LIFE could be more glamorous, better rewarded—we'd just have to see—but could it have been any more fun than it was in 1962? The sophomores and cripples, with Namath stepping up in preseason practice, were rounding into fearsome form. Namath had some jitters that first game, against Georgia in Birmingham, his "head just pounding in the dressing room," he says. But he quickly got a taste of what football was like in Alabama. "We walked out, the band started playing, the crowd went nuts," he says. "And my head didn't hurt me from then on." Perhaps he was one of those people who not only performed at his best under the spotlight but could perform *only* under the spotlight.

That was the first fall afternoon anybody outside of Tuscaloosa could marvel at Namath's near balletic jump passes. Richard Williamson caught a 52-yard eye-opener three minutes into the game. It was a rout—Alabama would win 35-0—and Namath basically played just the first half.

Of course even if Bryant was somewhat awed by the performance ("He did beautifully," the coach told the *Tuscaloosa News*, "for a sophomore"), he wasn't about to yield his own star power. After the game, as the newspaper reporters began to cluster around Namath, the obvious angle here, Bryant took note and scattered the scrum.

"Get away from that popcorn kid," he bellowed. "Go talk to the guys that did the winning." Namath was nearly stung to tears, but this was his introduction to big-time football. Lee Roy Jordan came over to Namath and put his arm around him and, laughing, said, "You don't know Coach yet." Jordan later explained that the coach prefers most opinions to come from under his own houndstooth hat.

But, really, Bryant knew who had done the winning, and it was his popcorn kid.

HAD ALABAMA been as inspired, or at least a bit less confused, in a regular season loss to Georgia Tech as it was against Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl, there would have indeed been another national title. At least Bryant had a sense of what had happened in 1962 and what it might mean in years to come. He couldn't have guessed all that would transpire: having to suspend Namath the next year for drinking (damn you, Hoot Owl!), dealing with the catastrophic knee injury to his star quarterback the year after that and winning the national championship with Namath after that injury—the hint of tragedy now in poignant counterbalance to all that silly exuberance.

But Bryant could be sure that he was nurturing greatness, was some part of sports history, was in partnership—the two of them as odd a couple as could be—in the kind of drama that would endure, well, at least half a century, long after he'd be gone. □



Mike the Tiger

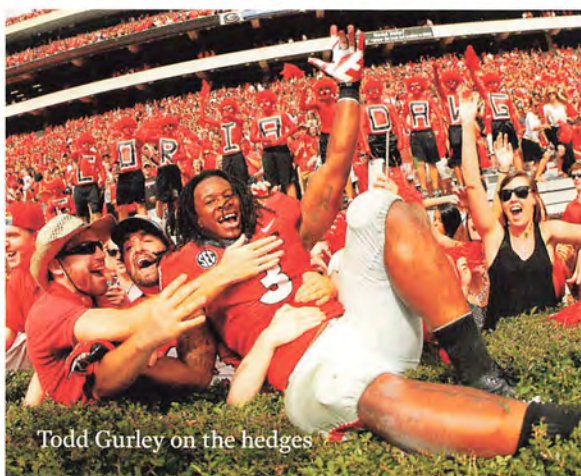
2.

Louisiana State University

SEC founding member

"LSU football will forever be the magic of nighttime home games at Tiger Stadium and the band playing 'Tiger Rag.' Championships in 2003 and '07 brought the Bayou Tigers back to the top of the sport in the modern era."

—TIM LAYDEN



Todd Gurley on the hedges

4.

University of Georgia

SEC founding member

"Once coached by the great Pop Warner, Georgia has been a player on the national scene since 1942, when the Bulldogs claimed a share of the national championship and tailback Frank Sinkwich won the Heisman."

—WILLIAM F. REED



Gator pride

3.

University of Florida

SEC founding member

"True, the Gators' ascent has been relatively recent, but better late—eight SEC crowns since 1991; three national titles since '96—than never. Mix in Gatorade, The Visor, Urban Meyer and Tim Tebow, and you've got a (nouveau) rich tradition."

—AUSTIN MURPHY



Smokey and the checkerboard

5.

University of Tennessee

SEC founding member

"Robert Neyland was hired in Knoxville in 1926. His mission: Beat Vanderbilt. He did far more than that, building Tennessee into a national power. Phillip Fulmer carried on the tradition with the '98 national title."

—ANDY STAPLES

6.

Auburn University

SEC founding member

"Auburn's first coach of note was John Heisman. Yes, that Heisman. Hired in 1895, he set the tone for the rest of Auburn's history, which includes seven perfect seasons, eight SEC titles and the 13th-most wins (734) in FBS history."

—LARS ANDERSON

FLUSH WITH JOY

After a big win, Auburn fans know exactly where to head (Toomer's Corner) and how to express their excitement.

Photograph by John David Mercer/USA Today Sports





The Grove



7.

University of Mississippi

SEC founding member

"From coach Johnny Vaught's hiring in 1947 through the '60s, the Rebels were a national powerhouse, winning six SEC championships and a national title. Archie Manning quarterbacked there, as did his son Eli."

—B.J. SCHECTER

Kyle Field



8.

University of Arkansas

Joined SEC in 1992

"Since Arkansas jumped to the SEC, the Hogs have proven themselves worthy of inclusion, with SEC West divisional titles under Danny Ford in 1995 and Houston Nutt in 1998, 2002 and '06."

—TIM LAYDEN





9.

Texas A&M University

Joined SEC in 2012

"How much do fans love their Aggies? In 2014, A&M broke SEC and Texas state records—for college and NFL games—for attendance when 110,633 fans jammed Kyle Field as the Aggies lost to Ole Miss 35–20."

—LARS ANDERSON



Cowbell country

10.

Mississippi State University

SEC founding member

"Mississippi State has frequently been disparaged as an 'aggie school.' But rather than get offended, fans turned the insult on its head and have proudly embraced the ringing of cowbells at home games."

—WILLIAM F. REED

The Next Five

These candidates finished just outside the Top 10 in our voting



QUARTERBACKS

11. Babe Parilli, *Kentucky*
12. Jackie Parker, *Mississippi State*
13. Tim Couch, *Kentucky*
14. Matthew Stafford, *Georgia*
15. David Greene, *Georgia*

RUNNING BACKS

11. Shaun Alexander, *Alabama*
12. Johnny Majors, *Tennessee*
13. Garrison Hearst, *Georgia*
14. Cadillac Williams, *Auburn*
15. Trent Richardson, *Alabama*

WIDE RECEIVERS

11. Terrence Edwards, *Georgia*
12. Steve Meilinger, *Kentucky*
13. D.J. Hall, *Alabama*
14. Ozzie Newsome, *Alabama*
15. Jordan Matthews, *Vanderbilt*

TIGHT ENDS

11. Frank Thomas, *Auburn*
12. Dale Van Sickel, *Florida*
13. Randy McMichael, *Georgia*
14. Benjamin Watson, *Georgia*
15. Jacob Tamme, *Kentucky*

OFFENSIVE LINEMEN

11. Luke Joeckel, *Texas A&M*
12. Billy Neighbors, *Alabama*
13. Shawn Andrews, *Arkansas*
14. Carl Hinkle, *Vanderbilt*
15. Edgar Chandler, *Georgia*

DEFENSIVE LINEMEN

11. Bob Gain, *Kentucky*
12. Kevin Carter, *Florida*
13. Eric Curry, *Alabama*
14. Lou Michaels, *Kentucky*
15. Frank Kinard, *Mississippi*

LINEBACKERS

11. Rolando McClain, *Alabama*
12. Aundray Bruce, *Auburn*
13. Jevon Kearse, *Florida*
14. C.J. Mosley, *Alabama*
15. Jarvis Jones, *Georgia*

DEFENSIVE BACKS

11. Morris Claiborne, *LSU*
12. Deon Grant, *Tennessee*
13. Fred Smoot, *Mississippi State*
14. Antonio Langham, *Alabama*
15. Tyrann Mathieu, *LSU*

COACHES

11. Phillip Fulmer, *Tennessee*
12. Bobby Dodd, *Georgia Tech*
13. Frank Thomas, *Alabama*
14. Charlie McClendon, *LSU*
15. Wally Butts, *Georgia*

GAMES

11. Tennessee-Auburn 1997
12. LSU-Kentucky 2002
13. Arkansas-Tennessee 1998
14. Georgia-Tennessee 2001
15. Tennessee-Kentucky 1957

SINGLE-SEASON TEAMS

11. Florida 2008
12. Alabama 2011
13. Alabama 1992
14. Alabama 1966
15. Kentucky 1950

RIVALRIES

11. Tennessee-Vanderbilt
12. Arkansas-Alabama
13. Mississippi-Tennessee
14. South Carolina-Florida
15. LSU-Mississippi

PROGRAMS

11. South Carolina
12. Georgia Tech
13. Kentucky
14. Missouri

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Who is the greatest running back in the history of the Southeastern Conference, Herschel Walker or Bo Jackson? What are the fiercest rivalries in the SEC? The best programs? SI's team of experts once and for all settles the questions college football fans have been debating since the conference was born



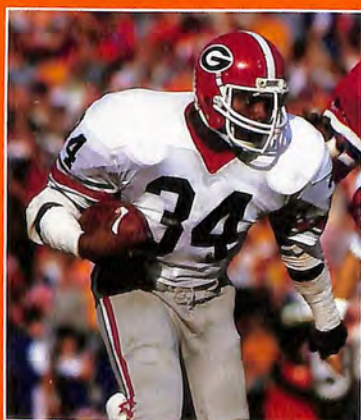
MISSISSIPPI Archie Manning



LSU Patrick Peterson



ARKANSAS Darren McFadden



GEORGIA Herschel Walker



ALABAMA Bear Bryant



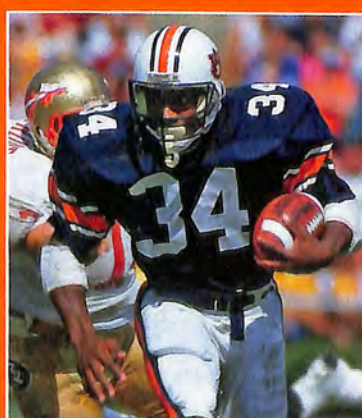
TENNESSEE Reggie White



FLORIDA Danny Wuerffel



SO. CAROLINA Jadeveon Clowney



AUBURN Bo Jackson